WINTERING OVER

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree of Master of English at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

February, 1980

ABSTRACT

WINTERING OVER

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Wintering Over is a collection of ten short stories, each of which deals with the theme of trespass. The trespasses which occur are sometimes upon private property, but more often, they are transgressions against the explicit and tacit codes of nationality, class, profession and family. The penalty for trespass, as seen by this collection, almost always involves some loss of freedom, though the characters presented here do not always perceive their loss, nor do they learn from it.

Time, I thought, strips us rudely of the privileges of the bystander, and in the end that couple chatting loudly in bad French in the lobby of the Grande Bretagne (Athens) turns out to be us. Someone else has got our post behind the potted palms, our quiet corner in the bar, and, exposed, perforce we cast around for other avenues of observation.

John Cheever
"A Vision of the World"

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Aurora/Anna Marie

It was our usual custom to walk quickly from Aurora to Flynn's. And if we could hitch a ride, it was even better because Flynn's store was the starting point for our walks. After a Coke at Flynn's the only problem was waiting for Anna Marie to come out of the john, which I think must be one of her favorite locations. Then we would walk back to town and this was always the best part of all.

If the afternoon was warm enough we could unbutton our long coats all the way and let them flap around in the wind. Anna Marie would just as soon have kept her coat closed to hide her fatty thighs, but she couldn't very well walk bundled like an eskimo with me beside her all free and easy. As for myself, it was always the shortest skirt the law would allow and most often a white blouse tucked into it. Since I'm not very tall the blouse was usually pinned up on itself so as not to show out the bottom of my skirt. We had the same coats - grey plastic that looks like wet leather. And since no one looks that far down, we could get away with school shoes, which always

got grey with dust anyways.

It's been about three years since we started our walks. Once we had a fight about whose idea it was in the first place but I believe it was something that had to happen regardless of anyone having ideas about it. Aurora, where we live, is a place Champlain paddled through, only the locks weren't there then. In the spring, it fills up with American tourists and there are so many New York licence plates around that I think the Americans must live at least six in every cabin. Prices go up because they pay for everything without checking first how much is in their wallets. And in the winter, when they're back in the States, they pay again to have the snow shovelled off the roofs of their cabins. Sometimes, when they first build a cabin, no one tells them how heavy the snow can be and in March it just pushes the roof on through to the floor. Usually all four sides of the cabin are down and it looks like a wooden apron around an ugly pile of melting snow.

Some town people even steal paintings from fallen cabin walls. But the funny thing is that the paintings are usually cheap pictures of trees and snow, and most of the year they can get that just by looking out the window.

Since staring out the window at trees and snow isn't the most exciting thing in the world, you can see why Anna Marie and I like to show off during the summer. At first we had no money to get better clothes from the discount houses in Lindsay and Bobcaygeon and, not being men, we couldn't very well take Americans on fishing trips or shovel off their roofs.

Then McGuire's Clothing opened in Bobcaygeon and we worked on the weekends for a dollar an hour and got the pick of clothes as soon as they came. Not long after that, the summer people started to notice us walking back from Flynn's.

When we walk, we first stop at the elementary schoolhouse, which, you'd better believe, has no one near it when school's not in. It sits back from the road far enough to leave Anna Marie panting by the time we get there, but the water pump never needs priming and we get to wash off some of the road dust. The school usually has all its windows broken by summer time and why they bother to replace them I'll never know because birds are all the time trying to fly through and a big crow goes through like nothing was there. There are always two or three dead ones inside. Once someone had broken the school door open and I tried to talk Anna Marie into going in with me to see if there was any chalk left lying around, but she was afraid that there were bats and that cooties lived in the walls. The last wouldn't surprise me because the kids in this school, when they stand in front of you, have trails like footpaths all up and down the backs of their heads.

After we visit the school it's back to the road and maybe we get a ride. Or maybe we pass one up if it's people who live around here. But for the most part they don't recognize us and think we're Americans anyways, so they let us walk. A long convertible that smelled of fish stopped for us once and Anna Marie and I both had to get into the front seat because the back was filled with fishing tackle and what looked like a

ton of muskies and catfish. The guy driving was from New York, of course. He kept reaching across us to make sure the door was locked and each time pushed his arm against my bosom while he jiggled the door handle. Finally, he did the same thing to Anna Marie, and right there, she tried to open the door and get out. I had to hold her in, or I swear the girl would have jumped onto the road. Since she's three years older than me, I expected that she could handle herself a little better than that but no, there she was trying to kill herself. She should have known the guy couldn't have done much more, seeing as how it was a convertible with the top down. He couldn't very well have jumped on her with the whole countryside watching.

When Anna Marie got herself calmed down, she begged to be let out. The guy from New York stopped the car and asked if I wanted to go too, but I couldn't let him think that I was no better than Anna Marie so I opened the door and let her out. She stood there looking at me from the side of the road and as we took off again I smiled and waved at her until it looked like the poor girl was going to cry. After that, she never asked to be let out again, no matter what happened in the front seat.

When we were on our way I let the guy do pretty much what he wanted, which wasn't so bad because he was very good looking. He drove me close to my house and put a ten dollar bill in my hand. I was surprised to see this and asked him what gives and he told me he'd be back to pick me up that night to go on a

date. I took it because I knew he was a fool and would never show up again. Of course I was right, and when Anna Marie saw the money, she actually did cry.

But it was unusual for us to get a ride from the elementary schoolhouse and if it was a nice day, we were just as happy to walk on to Butor's. Or at least we had always been told the place belonged to Butor even though we had never seen him. There was only what was left of his house which was burned out except for the walls. No one was sure who the property belonged to now because Butor died in the fire, but since he was French everyone was sure that he must have a big family somewhere in Quebec just waiting to claim it. Anna Marie of course is French, but she doesn't have an accent and there isn't any church for her to go to in thirty miles. Her family holds private services all for itself on Sundays and some people believe they kill animals and sing songs to them. For a fact I know this isn't true because that girl walks to the other side of the road when she sees a squashed frog.

Anna Marie is the main reason for stopping at old Butor's house. I'd just as soon pass it up because burrs grow thick around it and snakes sometimes sun themselves on what's left of the slate path from the road. Every time we stop there Anna Marie makes me promise not to tell anyone and then she gets on one side of the burned-out window while I stand on the other. Then she tells me things that are mostly stupid. Like she picks her nose and spends more money than she should on clothes and to top it all off, she claims that she "abuses

herself," but I've never seen a less abused girl than that one.

There are other stops. In the spring the Presbyterian church taps the maples that stand around it so we just go in and help ourselves to a few cups of sap before it gets boiled down. Then there is Bud Finley's house, the only house between Flynn's and town with people living in it. When Bud's parents aren't there, which is most of the time, things can get pretty wild. Especially since they had the hydro-electric installed and Bud walked off with the school's record player. Anna Marie and I dance and Bud joins in by trying to play a waste basket, which adds nothing at all to the music. But Bud is also good looking and has a steady job. Even Anna Marie likes him, but she isn't any competition since he's about as Catholic as I am.

Bud's is usually our last stop. But, if it is still light outside when we leave his place, there's always the locks beside the river that goes through town. When the locks have been closed all day the fish get trapped in small rock pools. Anna Marie likes this place most of all and calls it her personal aquarium. Sometimes, there is even a muskie with his back sticking just above the water and kids try to gaff it and haul it out of the water. Most of the time though, only a few carp get caught in the pools and they're not supposed to be good eating because they live on garbage. The carp mostly stay in one place and move their tails from side to side as if they were fighting a current, but the pools are quiet and

the water takes a long time to drain off. If we stop to talk for an hour, when we leave, the fish are in the same position and the water is still high enough to cover them. If the locks stay closed all night, bears come from the woods and pull the fish from the pools. I'm sure they don't have any trouble catching them because the carp must just float there, wondering why the river is moving so slow.

This year I will be old enough to quit school. Anna Marie has one more year to go before they make her drop out because she's too old. I would be going into Second Form, but nine years of school is already enough. McGuire's has offered me a full time job and if I stayed in school any longer, someone else would get it for sure. If the job gets too boring, Bud is always around and he's no fool, so I figure I can marry him. But right now there's no need for me to think about that. The weather is warm now and Anna Marie is still my friend and soon we'll be walking every week.

Getting the Hang of It

1.

Every Saturday, when the listener surveys had been tallied, one of the popular Top 40 stations in Miami declared itself the winner. The first month they lived in the city, they listened for the results each Saturday afternoon. They had followed the warm weather from Nova Scotia to Florida, leaving windy Truro at night to find Indian Summer in Massachusetts the next afternoon. Two nights later, lost on an orchard-lined road in Georgia, Paul heard the distant voice of a Miami announcer wash in over the twangy hillbilly station that his father had chosen. When it washed out just as suddenly, his mother pushed all the tuning buttons in sequence so that the dial pointer scuttled across the band trying to retrieve the signal as though it were a homing beacon.

They took the Collins Expressway into Miami Beach, where they learned from a short-sleeved motorcycle patrolman that Miami itself was miles to the west, on the other side of Biscayne Bay. They blushed and nodded gratefully, stunned at the

idea that they had driven two thousand miles to the wrong city, and took the causeway to a motel on Biscayne Boulevard in Miami. The same afternoon his father arranged to sublease a house in Coral Gables. The square white note pad that the manager kept in the motel's phone booth was left covered with the rapid calculations of family accounts.

The house sat on a street of meticulously bordered lawns dotted with dwarf banana trees, mango, papaya, and blanketed with the smell of jasmine. They felt like intruders. His mother arranged all their household goods in three front rooms, as if daring them to live outside the frugal orbit she had established. His father's truck, with its rusting Nova Scotia tags and spotty grey coat of primer, sat incongruously in their white gravelled driveway. Curious neighbors on after-dinner walks would stop beside the truck to read the sign on the leaning plywood walls bolted to its bed. Watching them from the darkened kitchen, Paul could see their lips sounding it out as though either the words or the message were somehow difficult and foreign: D. McConnell. Carpenter and Roofer. General Contracting.

On Saturday afternoon his mother would study the long column of houses for rent in the Miami Herald, referring all the time to a small map of the city she had borrowed from a neighbor. Some sections of the map had been neatly fenced off with pencilled boxes. Other sections were labelled "White." While he waited for the Help Wanted ads, invariably in the same section of the paper as Houses for Rent, his father would leaf

through old copies of Esquire, Flair and Look, which they had found in one of the unused bedrooms. He often ripped the pages when he turned them, as if the movement were too fine for his heavy wrists and fingers. His large hands were always at odds with the rest of his body, which had a look of almost hollow-boned fragility. In a baggy flannel work shirt, his chest seemed to be concave. His hair, as light and fine as a baby's, formed only a sparse fringe around the top of his head. His hands trembled. Setting a nail into a stud, he would jab at it with the hammer at the instant his shaking hand happened to be holding the nail perpendicular to the surface of the wood. All the same, Paul knew his father was a good carpenter.

When WQAM declared itself the winner on the fourth consecutive Saturday and WFUN, its competitor, was still on the air, Paul's mother decided that their competition was all somehow duplicitous. The listener surveys didn't mean anything. It no longer mattered if she were loyal to the station she had first heard in Georgia, then lost, then recovered in St. Augustine. The radio, she said, would have to do without her. She let Paul spend two dollars for batteries at Walgreen's so he could take the radio outside with him; she didn't want to hear it.

At night, tired of hearing the same DJ's insistent voice as he lay in bed, he would slide the tuning dial over to the other station's frequency, where one DJ had been broadcasting continuously for one hundred hours from a booth in a car

dealer's parking lot. There was an anxious, angry edge to his voice when he boasted about the world records he was breaking and about his listeners who, he said, depended on him. He sounded like an inhabitant of some vivid, unrestrained and frightening world. Paul's father, walking past the bedroom at eleven each night, would hear the radio and call, "Lights out." Minutes later his mother would yell, "Put the damned thing off."

2.

In January they were still living in Coral Gables, and renting two rooms to a student from the University of Miami medical school. He had been a doctor in Cuba, he told them, but now worked as a janitor at the university, where he was also studying to pass the professional exams which would allow him to practice in Florida. Having a boarder gave them an almost giddy, proprietorial feeling. They moved around the house with an exaggerated sense of responsibility, ready to do anything their tenant might ask. But the young man never asked for anything and after a few weeks the back half of the house seemed as though it had never belonged to them. Paul would meet the boarder in the yard as they both left for school and in their surprise they would look at each other as though they were both trespassers.

Paul met Mrs. Tannenbaum after answering an ad she had tacked to the bulletin board at the 7-11 store. She wanted a

boy to do yard work. A stunted cabbage palmetto clung to the sandy loam in the centre of Mrs. Tannenbaum's back yard and he would hang the strap on his transistor radio over a broken frond on the tree so he could listen to music while pruning the spare, nameless shrubs that staked out the perimeter of her yard. Catching an occasional glimpse of her watching him through a half-closed jalousy, he would flex his arm muscles and try to look strong and tireless, working until droplets of sweat flew from his eyebrows into his eyes, making them burn with a sharp salt tingle. Then, turning to see if she was still watching, he would find her gone.

He worked for a dollar twenty an hour and lunch, always a warm slice of salami on a single piece of bread. While he ate she talked to him. She was a widow. She was from New York. A whining sigh punctuated her sentences when she spoke about herself but she was stern and full of sarcastic humor when she talked about neighbors or relatives. She became as completely Floridian to him as white stucco or healthy brown skin.

It was important to her that the blunt ends of table legs and the underside of chair seats be waxed every week. She gave him a footstool so he could reach the highest leaves of a rubber plant in the screened Florida room and wipe them with a dark, citric-smelling oil which made them shine like plastic. Balancing on the stool, washing the walls and ceiling, he would look down and see that she had quietly walked into the room to watch him. Her floral Hawaiian muu-muus billowed from her sloping shoulders and flapped and undulated to the ground

from her stiffly supported bust. When she leaned forward, the tired elastic at the neck of her dress would let the material droop, amazing him with the few full drops of perspiration which formed a wet and perfectly circular pool in the concave slope between her breasts. As she stood up, the dress would close about her again and exhale the cool smell of camphor-ice.

After he had worked for three weekends it seemed impossible that Mrs. Tannenbaum could find anything more for him to do. When he arrived at her house from the bus stop, carrying his tools in a canvas duffle, she invited him to sit in the Florida room and gave him a cup of tea and a sweet roll. Then, with a rush of explanation she told him that she had seen some palmetto bugs outside, but that there were none inside and "even the best houses down here have them."

He had seen these dark cockroaches running from the light in the kitchen at home. They were as long and dark and thick as a cigar butt. Stepped on, their hard shells sent a shudder of sickening vibration through the sole of his shoe and up his leg to his stomach. To get rid of them, exterminators covered entire buildings with light fabric and pumped in gas until it inflated, making the house look as though a billowing orange balloon had just landed on it.

"Just find out where they are and do something," Mrs. Tannenbaum instructed him. "You know," she said, reaching for a can of Raid under her wicker settee and putting it down beside his tea cup.

Outside, not knowing exactly what to do, he searched

underneath hedges and checked for entrance holes along the concrete foundation and in window frames. At the rear of the yard he found a book-sized slab of concrete raised just above ground level. He pried it up with the blade end of a pair of pruning shears and pushed it aside. A thick army of palmetto bugs moiled around the bottom of the concrete box it had covered, coming half-way the height of a water shut-off valve inside. They churned like an agitated mass of dark molasses, spilled over the sides of the box and disappeared into the stiff grass. Jumping from them, he fell and then scrambled to his feet, spraying insecticide into the grass in a defensive circle around himself.

He retreated to the centre of the yard but the palmetto bugs had all somehow disappeared. When he nudged his pruning shears with the toe of his shoe, a dozen more ran from their disturbed cover. He carefully picked up the open duffle bag, shook it, and hung it from a palm frond beside his radio. He heard a Cuban sternly reading an announcement on the news. The Cuban said his name was Jose Cardona. He said the Cuban Revolutionary Council had launched an attack on Cuba at a place called Bay of Pigs.

Paul turned the volume up. His mother was working in a box factory in Little Havana just off Flagler, and a week before had brought home news that all the Cubans were drawing their vacation pay, "and that means there's going to be something with Cuba." He and his father had listened respectfully to what seemed like romantic and even clandestine information.

Neither of them had thought of what it might be that was going to happen in Cuba. They couldn't even agree on the direction in which Cuba lay off the American mainland.

He looked back at the house and saw Mrs. Tannenbaum watching him through the jalousy. The slats snapped vertically shut and Mrs. Tannenbaum appeared at the side door, waving a bamboo fan and holding a glass dripping with condensation. "You did something out there?" she asked. "Didn't you?"

3.

An ad appeared in the Personals and in the Help Wanted sections of the Miami Herald: "Anxious to Succeed? Young Men 13 to 17 Wanted for Sales Positions. Income as great as your desire to get ahead."

He was in a third floor office in northeast Miami. The building faced south over the shabby grey frame houses and tenements of Brownsville to the business district, almost a hundred blocks away. The view from the office window was partially blocked by an air conditioner that shuddered occasionally as it worked to keep the small room overcooled. He tried to be inconspicuous about reaching into his suit jacket pocket to recover the sheet of mimeo paper with his instructions. Across the top of the page someone had hand-lettered, "From the desk of Nick Pappas." Beneath that, it told him where and when to report for work and said he should memorize a short sales speech which began, "Hi! Do you have a telephone?"

He waited uncomfortably with six other boys, none of

whom wore suits or even jackets. Tongue-shaped shirt tails, which they wore outside their jeans, lay in their laps like short aprons. One boy, a Negro, wore a white shirt that had acquired the spotty grey pallor of an overbleached kitchen rag. Another boy, with scented dark hair and a light purple shirt, was obviously a Cuban. Apart from his general appearance, Paul recognized the heavy, square glasses frames which all the Cubans seemed to wear. Two of the boys talked quietly. When the air conditioner clicked off, their whispers echoed lightly in the high-ceilinged room.

A young man walked into the room from an inner office. He was wearing a beige suit with large buttons and a yellow tie with grey diagonal stripes. "A short interview," he said, crooking his finger at the boy with the white shirt and the Cuban. The boys glanced at each other with expressionless faces and slowly followed the man's clicking footsteps into the hallway.

"I bet that's gonna be some interview," a boy said.

"It's the U.S. Space Program," said another. "Coon to the moon by June."

Their sudden laughter stopped when the young man returned from the hall. He led them to a meeting room with four rows of folding chairs arranged in front of a low wooden platform. The unfinished plywood walls of the room were decorated with framed slogans and warnings. The largest read, "Never Use the Word Free." Paul took a seat at the edge of the room and recited the sales speech to himself.

The young man stepped up onto the wooden platform. Paul could see the perforated violet panels on the tops of his shoes. "I am Mr. Pappas," he began, "and my father wants me to come work on his sponge boat in Tampa." He let his right hand dangle at the wrist, stared down a snicker from one of the boys, and showed them a large sapphire ring in a gold setting. "But I don't have to do that, you see. I worked my can off and in a couple months I had something like this to show for it." The boys, who were almost equally spaced in the room, like alternating squares on a checkerboard, leaned forward to look.

"And the way I got this is the same way you're gonna get it. You sell the magazines that we buy discount subscriptions to and if you sell more than three mags to one customer, you pick up extra P.M."

One of the boys put up his hand.

"P.M. is Prize Money. But you're stupid, right? You don't know how to sell a life preserver on a sinking ship." He waited for their laughter. "To get you started, we paid a consultant to write this sales speech for you, and you all know it, right? And if you don't, think fast." He pointed at Paul after dramatically sweeping his arm across the room.

"Let's hear it," he said when Paul stood up. "But that jacket and tie have gotta go. We don't want to scare anyone off. The image is boys, not salesmen."

Paul took his jacket and tie off and blankly recited the sales speech. Sitting back down, he realized that even the seat of his pants was wet with perspiration.

"Next," Pappas called. Each recitation was more enthusiastic than the previous one, as though they drew courage from each other's mistakes.

"OK," Pappas said. "Anyone who doesn't know the speech washes out. If your customer doesn't have a telephone, he can't afford to be buying subscriptions. Any paperwork we have to do on the freeloaders gets billed to you." He handed around booklets of order forms. "Let's do it!" he yelled with practiced enthusiasm.

The distance between the boys shrank as they leaned together to talk. Paul edged in closer to the group so Pappas wouldn't notice him. He wanted to leave but the noise the others were making seemed to hold him in its centre.

Outside, they crowded into Pappas' car, a black Thunderbird that drew exaggerated gasps from the boys. While he drove, Pappas told them about his career as a door-to-door salesman. He said that, to close a sale, he would offer to trim shrubs, water gardens, dust the furniture, "Or even," he said, "to give the lady of the house a quick feel and a bang while her old man's out. I used to have a hell of a time explaining to my old lady how I got rug burns on my knees from selling magazines." The boys' laughter was quick and shrill. "But if you try it, you'd better know what you're doing. Nookie don't pay for subscriptions."

Pappas drove the boundaries of each boy's territory and let them off one by one. He let Paul off last. "I think we're going to watch you today," he said. "Help you out until you get the

hang of it."

Paul stopped at a corner house and knocked lightly on the door. The street was a bare new development of concrete bungalows. No one answered the door. Before he had reached the next house Pappas drove along side the curb and hailed him. "Don't give up so easy," he advised. "Knock once, wait a minute, and then knock again twice as hard." Pappas pulled away and Paul returned to the first house to bang on the door. There was still no answer. At the second house he could see a woman watching television in her Florida room. When she came to the door, he raced through his speech. Surprise filled her face. She wrinkled her forehead and turned one ear toward him as if he had a slight speech defect that could be overlooked by an attentive listener. When he finished his speech he realized that he'd forgotten to start off by asking her if she had a telephone.

"That's stupid," she told him. "What do I need magazines for?" And she closed the door without further sign of annoyance, as if she had just turned off a radio. When he reached the end of the street, where the Thunderbird was already waiting, he had tried eighty houses.

Pappas, combing his hair in the rear-view mirror, signalled for him to get in. "You're too tall and stiff," he said. "I wouldn't open my door if I saw something like you coming up the walk. Not only that but you've got an accent or something. Where are you from anyways?"

"Hialeah," Paul lied.

Pappas let him off on an older street that ended abruptly in the parking lot of a white frame church. This time, Paul tried to look cheerful, walking across lawns instead of using the sidewalk, and smiling all the way through his speech. A few bored faces listened to him, thought for a moment, excused themselves to check with a husband or wife, and then came back to apologize. Some people would tell him no, but not close the door all the way, as though they wanted to let him know they were willing to be talked out of it. Seeing their indecision, he could think of nothing more to say, and left quickly for the next house.

Pappas still hadn't come back by the time he worked his way down to the church. He rubbed spit on the knuckles of his right hand where the skin was worn off. He followed a tile path to the presbytery behind the church and knocked on the rattling frame of the screen door. A short man, bald, but with hair curling out of his nose and ears, answered.

"Hi!..."

"I'm sorry, but I can't buy anything."

"This is an unusual offer."

"I'm sure I couldn't afford it."

"Just hear me out."

"Please don't make me be rude."

"Maybe you'd like some yard work done?" Paul wondered if he should wedge his foot between the door and the frame.

"I don't have time to listen to you."

"Hi, do you have a telephone?"

"No, I don't."

Again, Pappas waited for him at the curb, the dark car running at a fast idle to power its air conditioner. Two of the other boys were already squeezed into the narrow rear seat. One had sold four subscriptions and the other, eight.

"I thought you might have had something going at that last place," Pappas told him. "Good luck and brains is what it takes to get something like this," he said, hitting the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. "Some people just never get the hang of it. Everybody's a loser at something, you know?"

Sleeping in late on Saturday morning was a mistake. By nine-thirty or ten the heat would have lapped up the stairs to their second-floor apartment, filled the room like a heavy liquid, and pressed wetly on the eyelids of anyone still asleep. Getting up in the heat always seemed to signal a day in which it was impossible to wake up or to shake off the night's dreams.

"You should've got me up early," Paul heard himself saying as he woke up. He pushed himself up on his elbows, looked for his mother, and realized that she had called him from another room. When she appeared at the bedroom door, he waited for her to turn away before getting up. He pulled chinos and a white T-shirt on over his sticky skin.

They had three upstairs rooms and a kitchenette in a duplex with cracking pink stucco walls and a red tile roof. The

landing at the top of their stairs was screened on three sides but the corrugated plastic roof was half broken away and sometimes, thumbnail-sized tree frogs with tiny fingers that ended in small knobs would drop from the overhanging persimmon branches and fix themselves to the outside of the door. When his mother called again, Paul walked impatiently past her and pushed the screen door open. He found one frog clinging to the screen. Its back glistened such a perfectly gemlike green that he couldn't imagine why his mother was afraid of them. A house lizard, clumsy looking without the two inches of tail it had lost in a territorial battle, slipped through a tear in the screen as he approached it. He threw the frog back into the persimmon leaves.

"There had better be nothing left out there," his mother warned through the door. "Makes me feel like I'm walking through the bloody jungle."

As she walked down the stairs he could see that the weight of her small purse was enough to unbalance her shoulders and give her the hunchbacked look of some old women. Strands of hair clung to the back of her sweaty bare neck.

In his bedroom, he reached under the mattress and fished out a pack of Luckies. The cigarettes were flattened into ovals and threads of tobacco hung loosely out both ends. He took one and tapped it on the crystal of his watch to pack it as he had seen boys at school do. Someone had told him that you liked either Camels or Luckies and hated the other. He hadn't had the chance to try Camels yet. As he smoked, he was careful

to exhale through the open window.

It was the beginning of summer vacation and he hadn't been able to find work, so he had promised his father help loading CBS block and used brick on the truck later in the day. Except for cabinet work, his father had said, Florida's houses don't need carpenters. Just masons, plumbers and exterminators.

Riding with his father, Paul had seen most parts of Dade and Broward counties and he was beginning to feel some mastery of it all. He knew that people his father's age called Fort Lauderdale, "Likkerdale," but if he called it that in the presence of adults, they would look at him as though he had cursed. Brownsville, the monotonous and decayed Negro part of town in the northeast, was "Niggerville." People who lived in the string of Keys south of the Florida peninsula were known as "conchs," after the large, spiralling shells that sometimes washed up on the beaches. He had a good brown tan, wore loafers, knew that the sharp green burrs which grew on Florida's sandy lawns were called "stickers," and he was careful to pronounce "grease" as "greeze."

East of Hialeah, his father pulled off the road at a corner everyone called "The Slave Market." Fifty or sixty men perched on a long wooden corner fence or sprawled in its shade on the ground. A larger truck had already parked ahead of them and a thin white man wearing a construction helmet walked the length of the fence, pointing at some of the men and jerking

his finger back in the direction of the truck. The men he chose clambered over the rail siding around the bed of the truck. The tops of their heads bobbed up and down between the slats.

"Go get one," his father said. "But I don't want one that stinks."

Paul turned away quickly to hide his feeling of surprise - selecting workers was a man's job. He knew that the trick to choosing one was to not walk the length of the fence as though he were canvassing the stalls at a market. That way, the men chosen might think there was something special about themselves and ask for a higher wage. Instead, he quickly pointed to a slim, sweating young man with a black silk kerchief tied around his forehead as a sweatband. The young man hadn't appeared to be paying attention but the instant Paul signalled, he pushed himself away from the fence. "Dollar an hour," Paul said, surprised at his own feeling of confidence.

They worked through mid-afternoon selecting and loading bricks from a bulldozed pile of rubble beside a ruined Motel sign. Though the bricks were used, the labor of breaking off chunks of mortar that adhered to them combined with their attractively weathered look gave them a high resale value. The man Paul had picked worked in a preoccupied and distant way, stopping only to untie his sweatband and squeeze it dry. When the truck was loaded, they paid him and drove him to an apartment building in Brownsville. As they slowed for a traffic light, the man leapt out the back and slapped on the

side of the truck to let them know he was gone.

"I have to see if a jackpost I set up to level the floor in these niggers' house has settled," Paul's father said. Paul looked at him and saw that his face was the color of a rash. He now wore thin cotton work shirts which clung to the sweat on his chest and back, revealing shoulders which slumped protectively forward. "It's just a dirty crawlspace where this buck keeps his tires," he said, sounding as though he were speaking to himself.

They turned south on 17th Avenue and then turned again onto a road that had once been paved but was now just a gravel bed with broken slabs of asphalt lining its shoulders. It looked more like a northern street than any Paul had seen in Miami. The houses were frame with shingled sides, some surrounded by broken or tilting wooden fences. If the houses had ever been painted, it was with primer or whitewash only so the finish had a thin, dusty look. Red maple and a few small elms haphazardly lined the sidewalks. They stopped at a house with clapboard siding that was full of holes where the knots had fallen out.

Paul stayed in the truck to watch the tools in the open back. He put his feet up on the seat in his father's place behind the steering wheel and leaned the back of his head against the window. He closed his eyes and listened to the voices outside - high-pitched sudden whoops of laughter and funny, breathless name-calling. He sat up and opened the window. A light-skinned girl was throwing a muddy volleyball against the

side of the clapboard house and successfully intercepting it on the first bounce before either of the two boys she was playing with could reach it. It was hard to tell her age. Her breasts were full and they swelled and bounced as she ran. He stared at her, trying to catch her eye, but she seemed not to notice. They played at a frantic rate until one of the boys picked the girl up around her waist and held her, struggling and laughing, until his friend could retrieve the ball.

Back on her feet, the girl faced the truck and bent over, putting her hands on her knees and breathing noisily until she caught her breath. When her chest stopped heaving she walked toward the truck. He nervously searched out the window on the other side of the cab to see if she was walking to meet someone who might have come up on him from behind.

"You got something on your mind?" she asked through the open window. The cab was small and he felt trapped. The girl put her hands on her hips and waited for an answer. At this close range he could see that she was not really a girl, that she was a woman much older than him.

"I was just watching."

"Well I don't like to be watch like that. What you doin' here anyway?"

"I'm waiting for my father. He's doing some work in that house." He looked for the two boys who had been playing with the volleyball. They weren't even watching. They ran to the rear of the building, passing the ball back and forth.

"That your father? Well he a crook. That floor look like

a old mattress. It uneven." She stepped back from the truck and walked away, her hips twitching with anger.

He wanted to yell at her and tell her that she was wrong but he felt that if he tried to call out, he would choke on his tongue. He sat upright, rigid with embarrassment, until his father appeared from behind the house. The knees of his pants were caked with dark mud. For a moment he looked unfamiliar, like a sunburned tourist, a complete stranger.

A Better Life

From the bony sharpness of my interviewer's cheekbones I can see that his father came from Kentucky, probably driving an old wreck out of Boone or Kenton County into Covington and then across the railroad bridge into Cincinnati. I can tell that he doesn't live in this town because his eyeglass frames are square and bright, a design that marks people around here when they are the <u>first</u> generation to leave the land. That, and their slick polyester suits, makes them all look like accountants. Cardboard picture frames on his desk present their hinged backs to me, but I have no trouble imagining his wife's bad skin and their overweight children. He has hung a wood and brass plaque - a sports award - on the wall between the two stiff and overgreen landscapes supplied by the college's decorator. When he sits down in front of it, a careful instant after I sit, his hands begin flying over a form printed in green ink and thick with multiple carbons as he puts ticks in boxes and hieroglyphic snatches of notation on blank lines. Because he is so silent and so like me I imagine that he is

reading my mind.

When he looks at my face there appears in his eyes a glimmer of tribal recognition, which he ignores. "You can have your life experiences translated into a maximum of three terms gen. ed. credit," he says, and then adds with an apolgetic little grimace, "General Education."

Did he learn to talk like that here? Laughing to cover my nervousness, I ask him how they work out the standards for "life experiences" and "gen ed." His narrow hillbilly face dips over the forms again.

"Miss or Mrs?" he asks.

The office is hot but my teeth are almost chattering. "Neither," I tell him.

What I am now is local color, a sort of illustrated historical marker in this college town of New York Jews and Californians. Here, I can buy wild grapes (natural, local) but not California (Farm Worker's office here), Peruvian enamelled copper but not Chilean, Sindoori incense in brightly painted metal cylinders but not walking shoes, cocaine but not saccharine. Even though I grew up on the Ohio River not two hundred miles away, to this town I am an imported resource.

Picture me. Tonight I will be standing in the center of a party in a professor's renovated farmhouse. The cracking plaster walls of the living room will have been panelled with boards pulled from the collapsing walls of the barn. The fireplace mantel and round oak table and even the rough walls will be decorated with the finest pickings from estate auctions

held in Indiana towns that the New York antique dealers haven't discovered yet. There will be a Clabber Girl Baking Powder poster in the bathroom and in the hall a grandmother clock with a painted glass door, and perched on top of that, a red iron woodpecker that dispenses toothpicks when its tail is tilted. And somewhere near the center of the party will be two fat men in coveralls who work on the town's road crew and lease the professor's untilled land.

I will stand alone for a minute and some of the guests who have not met me will think that I am married to one of the men in coveralls. We do have in common our wide, deeply set eyes, sloping cheekbones, thin hair and narrow nostrils. But for the way I am dressed, I could easily pass for a hillbilly. Because the party will follow the reading at the college, one of the poets on the state circuit will walk up to me in a friendly, cocktail party way. It might be Robert Bly with his round glasses, wild hair and bright wool serape. He might come to me and say, "You don't look like a professor."

"Briar-hoppers aren't supposed to look like professors," I say, and he laughs out loud because I've introduced him to such a good expression. Later, I tell him that my grandfather knew Roy Rogers when he was called Leonard Slye and living with his family in a houseboat off Portsmouth. And about the Lithuanian families whose barns hold empty stalls and copper stills. I talk about brothers and sisters who live chastely together their whole lives and when they get too old to farm let the land out on shares and are forgotten. Then comes the

day when, because of unpaid taxes and ignored letters, a warrant server comes to the house and discovers that two of them have died and the bodies, on the sofa in front of the television, are discreetly covered with a clean white sheet. The thought of having to call a hospital or a police ambulance frightens the old survivors far more than death.

My host at the party, a professor, will see me with his guest of honor and smile and silently thank me for having come.

When I go home, Jim will be waiting outside in his car. Jim was born in this town but not into it. He didn't acquire any of the tricks of getting along here until he was divorced at forty and found himself in new company, taking acid and giggling at the test patterns on color TV in the middle of the night. For two years after that first divorce he hung around the college dances trying to make friends but confesses now it only happened when some freshman girl who was drunk lay down for an entire boy's dormitory. Jim tacked himself on and then had to put up with the girl's hysterics when he tried to give her ten dollars. In another six months he married her in fantastic apology. Now, she lives here with her kid collecting Jim's alimony and accepted as part of the town just because she was a student. But they still tag Jim as the dirty old man. His life is a Mr. McGoo performance, saved from disaster by grace alone.

"You deserve a better life than this," he always tells me. Maybe it's a proposal. I don't ask.

This life begins when you are fifteen years old and new in town and feel <u>delivered</u> from the crumbling river village

with its beefy-faced German and Polish boys and its thick-calved girls who graduate from high school into middle age. The store windows of the new town shine with bright goods and you stand in front of them as though you were watching yourself dream. For the first year, your fifteen minute walk down the length of the main street is to you as foreign as an Arabian bazaar. You study your reflection in the windows and in people's faces. For the first time, you hear your own hard upriver accent and practice in bed each night with cotton stuffed into your ears trying to make your syllables sound exactly like theirs.

At sixteen you can pass as a college student and spend your time on the perimeter of Saturday night folk dances avoiding the lights for fear that someone from town will recognize you. And you are recognized. First by someone from school (a plain girl who wears ancient, pilling cashmere sweaters and in school is clumsy and slow, but here, somehow predatory) who looks at you with languid recognition before turning away, and then by a teacher who may tell your parents that you have been seen at the college without an escort. Finally, your fear drives you into the common rooms of girls' dormitories where you can pose as a freshman and sometimes see into the girls' closets. The carelessly hung clothes are beautiful and expensive, but it seems the only place anyone could conceivably wear them is in the street scenes of Montparnesse which decorate the dormitory walls.

You are supposed to be in Bethesda, Kentucky, on a

church-sponsored weekend at a girl's camp. But when your parents release you at the bus stop you wave them away and then head for the college. You have such a fierce sense of your own independence and rightness that as you climb the stairs to the small flat just off the edge of the campus, the very walls, the handrail, the stairs themselves all have a familiarity and a glow as if they had been built for your use only.

From the room at the top of the stairs there is little sound because even the crack under the door has been stuffed with wet towels to keep the tart, heavy marijuana smoke from penetrating into the hallway. You knock and wait, hearing a brief scramble inside. Sunlight and smoke leak out the keyhole. You call your own name into the door. Then it becomes laborious, the waiting while you hear the towel being kicked aside, the bolt and chain locks being drawn, the nervous male laughter. When the chain sticks in its slide channel they seem to forget about you, having become ridiculously involved in the shape and sound of the lock. You kick the door, knowing that the loud bang will make them gasp.

Inside, somehow the smell of freshly laundered clothes in a duffle bag on the bed comes to you through the smoke and the sweet scent of the tan cones of incense which burn in a polished brass cup. Somehow, the boys themselves are lost in the recollection of all this and you feel that any boys would have done and that it is the bannister, the door, the smell of fresh laundry which will remain irrevocably yours.

When you are almost seventeen you are living in the flat

with one of the boys and know that your parents are fighting about whether or not to call the police and have you brought home to that absurd rotting house that they can't afford. You leave the telephone off the hook during the days spent alone because you don't even want your parents' voices to enter this new life and the things you surround yourself with. There are the red-dyed burlap curtains over the kitchen windows, the irreproachable neatness and warmth of the rooms with their unvarnished wood floors supporting hundreds of books evenly lined up in pine and brick bookcases. When you sit reading you notice that the velvet upholstery of the armchair gets hot in the sunlight and smells of smoke, animals, and its own dusty age. You run your hands over the surface of the velvet and feel its warmth on your fingertips.

It is only when you become pregnant that the boy begins to develop a face you will remember. He speaks about marriage and the future and money, not at all what you are interested in. He arranges a meeting with your parents and what you recollect of this is his deaconish posture as he explains himself and his concern for you. He sits on the shaky couch in your parents' living room, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and as he makes a point his palms come together with a soft and decisive click. Your parents are newly impressed with him and with you, pleased that you chose so wisely, pleased that he has money and addresses them with respect, and that he really does seem to be more a man than a boy.

The wedding ceremony takes place outside in a tall stand

of silver birch trees where the pastor from the college reads from Kahlil Gibran and then from the Bible. The guests glance at your beach-ball stomach with tolerant affection. You are driven away in a heavy German car which you learn is a wedding present from his parents.

Nothing is supposed to have changed. He continues in college and he takes you to visit your parents on Saturday where you see the ease with which he flatters your mother and becomes a friend of your father. You no longer live in a small apartment with red burlap curtains over the kitchen windows but in a frame house with new furniture and a carefully fenced yard with its own sandbox and swing set. His parents regularly send you clothes which make you look older and, like them, important. What you have most of, though, is time, and your house becomes filled with your activities: there is a pot shop in the basement and an oak and steel work bench in the living room where you make rings and earrings from gold and silver - his mother's hobby also. Between Christmas and your birthday in summer, an upstairs room collects a photographic enlarger, a painter's easel, an Italian sewing machine and a thick sheaf of stained glass.

You possess these things and you acquire the manners. "Kiln" must be pronounced without the n; earrings made from fragments of painted wood toys or heavy brass curtain rings get more attention than those that try to boast with a few small diamonds (and if it has to be stone, use those round black cinders from the railroad track). Cosmopolitan and the French Vogue may be left in plain sight in the living room if

there is a Nikon camera beside them and you can talk about Bert Stern's pictures of Suzy Parker. This is one of the few student houses rich enough and interesting enough to attract professors. Some of them laugh at your accent as though they can't believe that anyone really speaks like that.

The baby is a year old, having grown fat under the care of your husband and your mother. Your husband accuses you of being negligent, a failure, stupid. Then he begins to study all night in the college library and comes home in the mornings only for a few hours of sleep. As though a sign declaring that the marriage was condemned had been nailed to your front door, the men you meet at parties begin to call on you during the evenings. They have been to your house before, sense what you like and bring you perfect gifts of stone and glass and wood. Some of these men become thoughtful and tender lovers. You think that not even your husband would be offended by them; they seem almost sisterly. When you meet them on the street they walk directly to you and whisper something which is often simply kind, about the way you look, your clothes or your hair. A neighbor watching would suspect nothing.

When your husband attends his graduation ceremonies, his parents and your parents are there to watch, each thinking you are with the other. In fact, you and your husband no longer even speak to each other. You do not contest the divorce action that he takes a few months later and ignore your parents' suggestion that some of your husband's money is rightfully yours. It is all his parents' money, just as your baby has become

their baby. It is so easy to give up the baby and the money that, when regret finally comes, it will be worse than anything you could have imagined.

After, nothing is the same. You cannot live with your parents and the rent on the frame house is no longer paid. When you drift onto the college campus to try and make friends, the students you meet at dances in the cafeteria listen to your accent, watch the manners you've acquired since you were married, and look at you as if you are one of those zoo specimens behind glass and illuminated with thin red light.

One day, everyone sees you wearing a blond wig and spiky towering heels patrolling the streets of a residential part of town. The next night your hair is black and you wear pants, circling the college. Then, three miles out on the two-lane highway that runs through town. Sometimes, men pick you up and you go with them to Dayton or Columbus. And you are watched when you prowl the empty, comfortable streets. At first it is just concern for your safety that causes people to slow their cars or stay a moment longer in their darkened living rooms holding the drapes open a crack. Then it becomes open curiosity, particularly among the people you knew when you were married. Some are glad to see that you are unhappy, having told themselves long ago that people like you always had it in them. The worst are the professors who blandly nod at everything you do and tell each other that it is a necessary phase and that even pain makes some kind of statement. But when you get drunk at their parties, they usher you to the door, saying that they

will see you again, "when you've worked it out."

Then comes the day when you find yourself marching in a column of students and professors and townies because all the nice distinctions separating the life of the town and the life of the college have fallen in their fear and resentment of a war. Students and professors stop looking right through you on the street, you've become important to them. They need to feel that they have the respect of someone who doesn't live like they do, someone with an accent which national newscasters may not have, someone who has never been to college.

So you march with them on a winter day outside an Air Force base, having arrived there in a charter bus in which the fear hung so heavily that it seemed it should condense on the windows and be as palpable as the frost which you scraped from them as you approached the base and saw helmeted military police and rows of blue detention vans. The talk in the bus is frantic and full of bragging and if you believe it you will expect that one student has taped plastic explosives to the fence pilons which at a given electrical command will explode and flatten the fence. Another student brags about having sabotaged the telephone exchange. And another about pouring lighter fluid on his heavy winter jacket and setting himself on fire in the midst of the military police. You begin to tremble not at the sight of the nervous young men outside with their batons but at the dangerous company of the young men sitting in the bus seat behind you.

After you have parked, the demonstration's organizers

stand up to brief you about passive resistance, about your civil rights and about the need to protect your head and face from the batons. One of these young men tells you that ACLU observers wearing white tags on their lapels will be present. Then he tells a girl in a light nylon jacket that she should have worn something heavy and a brassiere under it to help protect her breasts.

Linked arm in arm (with someone who may turn into a fireball) you advance on the steel gates (which may explode) into the rigid batons of the military police (who may not be able to telephone for either replacements or ambulances). You mention all this to the boy on your other side and he assures you that there is no need to worry because ambulances are standing by and because the hospital on the base is "one of the best."

A moment before you reach the guards a gusty feeling of exhilaration sweeps the front line of marchers and it is so physical a sensation that the guards, despite themselves, take a step back. At this instant a photographer from the town darts between the two lines and stops long enough to take several pictures. In the still winter air, the ratcheting advance of his motorized camera hangs harsh and frozen.

You later discover a fifteen cent post card at the checkout counter of the town's drugstore. Your presence in the center of the grinning front row of marchers is exaggerated because the line seems to fall away on either side of you, as though you had been marching in a V formation. While you

stare at this picture a student walks up to the counter and buys a dozen. You recognize him as the boy with the lighter fluid. When you return home you find a letter from the photographer asking if you would like to buy a poster-sized reproduction.

Later, you start working for a committee raising bail money for the demonstrators who are still in jail. There is an urgent, early-morning feeling of excitement about this, for you work out of a downtown record store which is poorly heated, and passers-by stare through the window at the small crowd inside dressed in cheap winter coats and heavy sweaters and whose breath hangs in the air like steam above the telephones. It is your voice which has been chosen to speak on the phone to solicit donations from local merchants who have been sympathetic or generous to "the movement" in the past. As you work, well-wishers bring in cardboard carry-boxes of coffee and donuts. Three high school girls stop outside the record store and sign V to one of the office managers. He points it out to a woman at another desk and she returns the salute for him.

The winter melts away. The owner of the record store hangs plants in his windows and acts nervous because the tourists passing outside (a shopper from a town two miles away is considered a tourist) can see only anti-war posters in the windows, the record album covers and ads from Rolling Stone not going ignored, but being read by them as an identical kind of loyalty.

In April the office is relocated to the college and operates out of a room loaned by a history professor. You are seen in the halls so often that students take you for a professor and ask about courses. The department secretary writes your name and telephone number in her directory. One of the efficient young office managers from the record store, himself a part-time professor of history, leaves you in charge.

When you run out of your own money and move in with him (not the same apartment as years before, but the same plot of land, the original buildings having been demolished for Townhouses), he sets about what he sees as your rehabilitation with the same concerned and professional zeal he applied to protecting young girls' breasts from the clubs of military police. Living with him you read hundreds of magazines, begin on his bookcases at "A" and listen to the way he speaks with his friends. In two years, the History Department begins to recommend you as a tutor for freshmen.

Before he leaves you for a full-time job at another college, he tells you what to do:

You must go to college because you're wasted like this.

Yes. Thank you. Money.

None of that matters. You're a poor white. Rockefeller Foundation.

Thirty-one years old.

Good. Mature Students Study Plan. You've survived this long so why not get credit for it? You were an anti-war groupie and now you're turning into a university groupie.

Then?

Don't worry about then now. Then is the same for all of us.

And then he leaves you, telling you that the landlord has postdated checks for the rent until the lease runs out at the end of the academic term. And because you won't even have a place to live, you eventually phone for an appointment with the college admissions officer. Just as you were told it would, the college gives you an appointment the same day because they are hungry for people who are old or eccentric or black, prodigies or spectacular failures. That's the style.

"Present occupation?" the interviewer asks me.

I can hear Jim tonight, before he leaves, telling me that I deserve a better life. Suddenly, the thought of seeing him, the professor's house and the touring poet makes me want to run away. Where?

"Unemployed," I say.

"Previous occupation?"

And suddenly I hear myself speaking in involved professorial sentences trying to sound like some kind of prodigy from the hills, but I catch sight of his pen politely suspended over the cramped green form. He's not interested in me. I expect to see him slip the form into a drawer, give me a college catalog and after a decent interval of paper-shuffling, show me out. He stares at the green print on the application and distractedly touches the tip of his ball point to his tongue, leaving on it a black speck.

"I mean, what kind of job did you have before?" he says.

I think I can see a tiny crinkling of amusement at the corners of his eyes, but he still refuses to look at me directly.

I draw in a deep breath, but quietly, to stop my teeth from chattering again. "Hillbilly," I tell him.

He takes his glasses off to laugh and I can see his eyes crinkle completely shut. When they open again, he is smiling. He makes a rapid series of complementary check marks along the bottom of the page.

"Reason for wishing to attend at this time?" he asks, his voice welcoming me. And then he reads me a list of answers to his question, one of which I must choose so he can mark it on the green sheet. They are all the wrong answers, but that doesn't bother me becuase I know now he will find one that shows me to the best advantage. When I look at his face in this comfortable college room, I know that he also understands that getting to sit on <u>his</u> side of the desk is the first step to a better life. And to revenge for an old one.

Coupal Street

Sharon announced that she would go with him this time only if he found them a real house. They had lived in their last city, their last apartment, for two years, twice as long as any place before that. There, a larcenous and irresponsible landlord, a petty office job that left him frustrated and worn when he came home, a city that he found too provincial and self-satisfied, all these things made Craig feel as though he were being driven out. So at the end of their lease they quit their jobs, put the television, stereo, records and typewriter into temporary storage, loaded their clothes in the van, and left.

The van, a top heavy Volkswagon that leaned frighteningly around corners and wheezed on hills, was a relic of their college years. They had used it after graduation when Craig played with a band that followed old Route 17 all the way to Miami. They played clubs in Miami for six months and then crossed the state to the Gulf Coast where, in a land of house trailer retirement villages, the band folded. Craig and Sharon

stayed on, living in the van. He worked as a laborer in Tampa until a building trades organizer found out that he didn't have a Social Security number or an Alien Registration card and ordered him off the site. On borrowed money, they drove to British Columbia where he worked for an activist organization of draft dodgers, conservationists and Marxists. Then, with only a vague guarantee from the organization's publishing house, he drove to the Niagara Peninsula, where Sharon helped him collect material for a book on the seasonal workers who were flown in from Jamaica for the harvest. But one night he saw a news report about Negro and Chicano stoop labor in the States and his project seemed so trivial in comparison to the greater American exposés of greater sins that he dropped it. Since then, they had moved steadily to the east. Craig would stop somewhere to complete another year of school or begin to learn a trade, and then move again.

"I want a real house this time," Sharon had warned him.

Almost everyone he knew had also warned him against Montreal. It was too cold, English speaking people weren't wanted and didn't get served in the department stores, the drivers were homicidal, the city was dangerous and in decline, they said. And yet, as soon as they had driven past the reach of Ontario radio stations (and found themselves too far north for the American stations in New York and Vermont), he discovered that he didn't even want to hear English. The French was incomprehensible and yet reasurring; radio newscasts had the same note of alarm and self-importance that they did in English

but kept their message entirely to themselves. He felt that he had no part in the concerns of this world.

"Why," the woman from the Bureau de location asked him when they went in to look for a house, "would an English want to move here now?" Then, shaking her head when he only smiled, she opened a card file, wrote down a name and address, tore the sheet from her violet note pad and pointed to a thin line on the wall-sized map of Montreal tacked up behind her desk. Sharon carefully unfolded their own map and pencilled in an arrow at a black dash of a street named "Coupal." There were also arrows at hospitals, the English universities, a post office, an expressway exit, the rental agency and their hotel. Watching her draw in yet another arrow, Craig had a poignant sensation of her trying to pin their lives in place on the map, and he took longer than necessary to thank the woman from the Bureau who said that she had a house for them.

Craig stopped the van in the middle of the street as soon as they turned the corner and asked Sharon to check the map. The squat, rust red tenements on either side of the street shaded the narrow sidewalks like a brick canopy, and their drab flatness was unrelieved by balconies, porches or even window boxes. It was as if they had been hollowed out of solid brick by people who would peer down from their dark and curtainless windows like cliff-dwelling Indians.

It was a hot day, hotter inside the van, and Sharon pulled her blouse away from her chest and blew down the front of it.

She folded the crackling map into a size she could manage, studied the name and address on the violet note paper and ran her finger down the list of street names bordering the map. "Madame Gilbert lives on ... Côte des Neiges, Côte St. Luc, Coughtry, Coulanges, Coulonges, Coupal," she read out loud, guessing at the French pronunciation. "We're here, all right."

Before Craig got out he reached across her lap to lock the door. The unforgiving look of Coupal Street made it easy to believe that everything he had heard about Montreal was true.

"I'm all right," Sharon said, unlocking her door as he opened his.

Every entrance on the row of tenements was the same freshly painted, mossy green. It covered the doors themselves as well as their frames, buzzers, letter slots and door knobs. Below Madame Gilbert's green house numbers, two small window panes in the front door were broken and sharp triangles of dusty glass pointed out of the moulding. There was no door bell, only a butterfly-shaped piece of metal at the end of a shaft over the mail slot. He twirled it, but it spun noiselessly.

A voice startled him because he couldn't see anyone on the other side of the broken window. "English?" it asked.

"Yes," he said, and heard a slide chain bounce against the inside of the door. When the door opened he saw a tiny woman whose eyes were level with the centre of his chest. The top of her streaked grey wig had a worn circle that exposed a net of hemp squares with hair knotted to it.

"Bonjour," she said, nodding vigorously while she told him that the rental agency had called and told her to expect someone who spoke English to look at her house. "You won't believe that my windows were broken last night by an old man who has ninety-one years," she said, pointing up at her door. "It's not a gift to live on this street."

Madame Gilbert led him from room to echoing room in her flat. She told him about the painting, wiring and plastering that had to be finished, started and planned. When he tried to interrupt to tell her that it was a house he wanted, she refused to listen and told him to wait. In the bathroom, she showed him the way the linoleum had curled away from the walls because of water dripping from a cracked cistern. Then she stopped talking and looked at him as if she were memorizing the details of his face.

"I think there's been a misunderstanding," he told her. "We wanted a house. A bungalow. A cottage. Completely detached."

She curled her lip slightly. "Maybe you will do this for me after you see my cottage," she said, poking at the curly ruined edge of the linoleum with her toe. He could see inch-wide runs in her stocking disappearing into her shoe.

"You mean this isn't it?"

"No, mister, this is where I live. You don't want to move here, do you? After you take my house, maybe you can fix all this for me."

Craig felt the bathroom floor give slightly under his weight. "I don't want to repair houses, I want to rent one,"

he said.

"It's the wrong season for that. Everyone has moved already and made a lease," she said. "To do it now, you have to be rich."

"That settles it because I'm not rich."

Madame Gilbert stared at his face again. "You don't have to be rich for my house," she said. "You have to talk to people."

She moved out of the bathroom doorway and motioned for him to follow her to the kitchen, where she sat at an oilcloth covered table and picked up a cube of sugar.

"Why do I have to talk to people to rent your house?"

"There are people living there," she said, sucking on the sugar.

"Then how can I live there?"

"You have to talk to them. You can make them move. You can do what you have to do to make them go."

"Do they have a lease?"

When she didn't answer, he repeated the question.

"They have a lease," she said, "but they're no good. I go there every day to watch but they don't open the door for me to talk. "

"Get the police to move them out."

"Ha! The police laugh at me. Like that. Ha!"

Then she reached into the pocket of her apron and withdrew a brass ring like a watchman's, crowded with keys. She slid one off the ring and held it out to him. "This is your

house," she said.

At their hotel, Sharon slipped naked past the door to the kitchenette and into the bedroom. Her thighs were marked with thin white striations and her legs tapered into tiny, girlish ankles. Her feet left wet prints on the floor and he watched them, waiting for them to evaporate.

From the table where he sat, Craig could see a man in boxer shorts and T-shirt sunning himself on a fourth floor balcony across a tiny, blacktopped courtyard full of garbage bins and carelessly parked, dented cars. As the building's shadow advanced over the edge of the balcony, the man shifted his chair until it rested against the railing. When Sharon returned, Craig closed the plastic kitchen curtain so the man could not see inside. Sharon, with a white bath towel turbanned around her hair, sat opposite him at the kitchen table. She carried a pack of playing cards which she laid out in seven rows for solitaire.

"Why do they call them Bicycle?" she asked, staring at the package the cards had come in.

Craig was uneasy. It had become a tacit rule that they didn't discuss what would happen if Craig couldn't find a house, and yet it seemed to be the hidden question in everything they said to each other. It had been almost three weeks since he saw Madame Gilbert. Beside the gas stove there were two-foot high stacks of The Gazette, The Star and La Presse, as well as a pile of local weeklies. A dozen times, "Reasonable West

Island Rental" had turned out to be an unfurnished and unheated lower duplex for $350 a month. The detached houses they saw were miles away from public transportation and even more expensive. Desperate one day, they let a real estate agent show them a 4½ room apartment near the airport. In the living room they could distinctly hear a woman in the next apartment tell her husband that the newspaper was late while she tapped a spoon against the side of her coffee cup. On the South Shore they saw a farmhouse in a field facing an industrial park, but the house had cracks all the way through the walls and stank of age and disuse. In Notre Dame de Grace, Westmount and Outrement, they saw semi-detached houses with electrically heated driveways and service entrances in the back. Worse, when something in La Presse looked promising (Craig had decoded enough French to at least distinguish between a sous sol, très propre, pour dame seule and a luxueux triplex semi-détaché and was surprised to find that a Montreal "house" could mean a third floor walkup), and he called, the person who answered often spoke no English and after a few trial sentences he had to hang up in embarrassment.

"Why do they call them Bicycle?" Sharon repeated. He felt helpless before the demand in her voice.

"Maybe she's the kind of crazy rich woman who keeps a fortune in stock certificates stuffed into paper bags somewhere in that place of hers," Sharon said.

When he told Sharon about Madame Gilbert he had made the old woman a little shorter and more comical than she actually

was. He magnified the runs in her stockings into rips, made the cracked plaster and curled linoleum into a slum, and said that he'd caught a glimpse of the nimble old man who knocked out her window. When he told Sharon that Madame Gilbert wanted him to intimidate some people out of her house, Sharon hadn't laughed and instead asked if he really would do something like that.

"I'll buy another deck of cards and we can play double," she said. "Then we can just go on living in this place forever." Her hands flicked over the cards for another minute before she looked up again. "I'm awfully sorry. There just doesn't seem to be any place left for us to go."

They found Madame Gilbert perched heavily on the edge of her doorstep. The broken window panes in the door had been covered with a square of cardboard. Introduced to Sharon, she gushed extravagantly, rubbed the material of Sharon's blouse between her thumb and forefinger and told Craig that "Madame" was too young for him. When they led her to the van and slid open the side door, she leaned inside and cautiously inspected the interior before stepping up into it.

"You should get a nice place to stay, eh?" she said, arranging her skirts under herself as she settled on a cot behind the driver's seat. She leaned forward and touched Sharon's shoulder. "Five and a half. Garden. Free paint." Then, turning to Craig, "One hundred fifty dollars."

He tried not to look at Sharon. One hundred and fifty

wasn't enough. For that little, the house had to a a crumbling, dangerous ruin.

"Ha. I told you it's good for you," Madame Gilbert said, glancing back and forth between them.

She gave directions so rapidly that it was impossible for Sharon to keep track of their route on the map. Twenty feet away from a busy intersection Madame Gilbert would say that they had to turn - she couldn't remember in which direction - or they would wind up on the autoroute. When they were in the right hand lane, she ordered him across two lanes of traffic into the left. Twice she told him to turn the wrong direction on one-way streets. Then they found themselves on steep residential avenues with widely spaced houses that the newspapers advertised as Executive home.

"This is very nice here," she said, asking Craig to stop in front of a large stone house so she could see the flower beds.

In another few minutes, the streets had levelled and become crowded with apartment buildings and small stores.

"You are going to be surprised if you live here. Jew and Italian landlord will make you pay too much."

He saw Sharon recoil slightly at this but she said nothing. Because it was early afternoon there was very little traffic and driving was easy. Madame Gilbert praised the mayor, described her favorite stations in the subway system, recommended hospitals and warned against others, recited the names of parishes, stores, churches, and pointed out theatres and concert

halls.

"The Greek live here. It's no good for you."

"Too many Jamaican. No one can understand the way they talk."

"My brother saw a man get stab here."

"Too many tavernes."

"Beautiful. You should live here. It's all English here. No one to bother you."

Craig had turned up the radio to cover her voice, but it only made her speak louder.

"Why do you listen to French station?" she asked.

He stopped the van. "How do I know you even have a house?" he said to the round face in the rear view mirror. "When do we get to see this place?"

"Attend!"

She asked him to drive for a few more minutes and then ordered, "Turn. Turn. In a U. Here."

He wondered if she had just picked out the first house on the street that appealed to her and told him to stop at it. It was a little shoebox of a house with a square white stucco front, circled by a small stretch of yard and an iron fence. Tiger lilies grew all along one side in the shade, the lawn was cleanly edged beside the sidewalk, the steps to the front porch looked solid and were protected with rubber treads.

"The people who are living here are no good. They don't listen to me. Make them go away."

"Where will they go?" Sharon asked.

"They have other places to go. They're no good for mine."

Watching the house, Craig felt a tremor of fear in his stomach. "How do I make them go?"

"Your business," Madame Gilbert said. She looked out the window at the house as if it were dangerous.

Try, Sharon seemed to be saying when she looked at him.

Craig opened the door and stepped onto the street. If it were as nice on the inside, the house was perfect for them. He couldn't ignore that. He opened the iron gate and went on through, walking slowly as he tried to see through the glaringly opaque front windows. He would introduce himself, tell them what the problem was and perhaps even offer them help with their moving. If they resisted, he could imply that he was taking legal action against them. But what if they were old, or ill? He flexed the muscles in his legs to make them stop shaking before he rang the bell.

After a moment the door slowly opened and revealed a short hallway, at the end of which was a kitchen table with shiny tubular legs and a vase of cut tiger lilies. A girl, perhaps ten years old, stared at him. Her bangs hung down so low that he couldn't see her eyes.

"Can I see you parents?" he asked.

She twisted the door knob and looked at her feet, which were in slippers with small blue pom poms on top.

"Are your parents home? I have to talk to them for Madame Gilbert."

The girl glanced vaguely back at the empty kitchen,

swinging the door open a little wider.

"Madame Gilbert," he repeated.

The girl swung the door all the way open and disappeared behind it. On the wall of the kitchen he could make out a calendar with a picture of a cock crowing. The two doors off the hallway were closed. He wanted desperately to get a better look inside.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

The girl had lifted both her feet from the floor and, hanging onto the doorknob, let the door swing shut in his face.

"What did you expect me to do?" he said to the two women waiting in the van. "Walk in and get accused of child molesting and illegal entry?"

Madame Gilbert smiled. "Don't worry," she said. "She will tell her mother that there was a man speaking English at the door and saying my name. She doesn't know English so it will make her lsiten."

"Why didn't you tell me they don't speak English?" Craig demanded. "Do you think that if someone comes to their door speaking English, they're going to be cursed?"

"Please," Sharon tried to interrupt.

"You'll see it's going to be easier next time," Madame Gilbert said.

"We have exhausted this entire country and that's all there is to it. Unless you want me to start looking in Halifax. There aren't any houses here. We've run out of cities."

They were sitting on their hotel room balcony playing solitaire and watching the man across the courtyard shift his chair into the sun's path every few minutes. Craig had just phoned the American Consulate for information about immigrating and was told that there was a new system of awarding points to immigrants and a waiting list a year long. He chose one of the ads in the newspaper and called a lawyer specializing in immigration to the United States but would have to wait six weeks for an appointment. Sharon at first told him that she refused to go as an illegal again, and then said that she wouldn't go under any circumstances.

"It's time to stop," she said.

He tried the Bureau de location once again.

"Has Madame Gilbert already rented her house?" the woman behind the counter asked, flipping the cover from her circular card file. "Our records show that she has a house, the only one this month."

"Madame Gilbert is crazy," he said. "She wants someone to scare off the people she's already got in there. That house isn't for rent."

The woman let her card file fall closed. "It's not like that," she said. "Madame Gilbert calls us every day and complains. That's her sister in the house. They just don't like each other."

"That doesn't help me find a house."

The woman shrugged. "The woman says Madame Gilbert owes her some money for a security deposit. Maybe if you want that

house so much you should just take some money to Madame Gilbert's sister and pay her. She's got no reason to keep the place. She don't even live there."

"I saw a little girl."

"After school, that's all."

Filled with relief and a sense of having been completely redeemed, Craig took down the address of the house and the woman pointed it out to him on her wall map of the city. He knew the streets now and would have no trouble finding it.

He drove through a light rain to the house and went directly to the door. He had almost two hundred dollars in his pants pocket. He stood on the front porch for a few minutes after knocking heavily on the door several times. His money, he now knew, would carry far more weight than his English. When there was no answer he returned to the van to wait and listened with amusement to something on the radio that he finally understood to be "le country et western weekend." For the first time, he thought of registering for a course in French. Though it had been hot in the morning, clouds had built steadily all day and the wind coming in the window was cool.

In mid-afternoon, he saw in the rear view mirror a thin woman in Bermuda shorts holding the hand of a dark-haired little girl as they walked toward him on the sidewalk. He watched them open the gate and go into the house, which was unlocked. Rubbing the bills in his pocket together he opened the passenger side of the van and followed them. When he knocked on the door it was opened immediately.

"Oui?" the woman asked, smiling at him. She was younger than Madame Gilbert and had such a clear and untroubled face that it was hard to imagine them as sisters.

"I suppose," he said, suddenly feeling nervous, "I suppose I should explain to you what this is all about."

Her smile showed her complete lack of comprehension and he realized that he would have to be as simple and direct as he could.

"I would like ... I want to pay Madame Gilbert's debt."

"Madame Gilbert?" The woman seemed as puzzled as she was pleasant.

"Madame Gilbert. Cash. Vous," he slowly said, reaching into his pocket. It had begun to rain again, this time harder, and he felt like a fool. He did not want to offer everything he had - in fact, would not give it to her until she had actually left the house and he was moved in - and brought out one tight role of five twenty dollar bills.

He tried to straighten out the curl in the bills and then fanned them slightly and held them out to the surprised woman. But before he could decide what more to say to her, the gate clanged open noisily behind him and he turned to see Madame Gilbert running heavily toward the porch. "Stop!" she cried. "You're trying to cheat me. You don't have to pay them nothing to move into my house."

The woman in front of him looked at Madame Gilbert, Craig, and his money. Before he could stop her she grabbed the bills and threw them on the ground at his feet. She pointed to the

money and started to yell, and the little girl with bangs came to the door but held it nearly shut because the wind was blowing the rain inside. Craig knelt between the two screaming women to keep his money from being blown away and Madame Gilbert snatched her watchman's key ring from her purse and threw it on the ground in front of him. Whatever they said to each other made no sense to him, but the noise of their voices stayed in his ears for a very long time.

Listening In

I.

Bill Harmon hugged the bag of groceries to his chest but his careful selection of pastries, fruits and crackers continued to bulge out the top and rattle around so mercilessly that he had to step into a doorway off the Park Avenue sidewalk and rearrange things. Just touching the bright labels with their angular Greek lettering gave him pleasure. On the 80 bus to St. Catherine Street, the English conversations he heard seemed so petty that he strained to pick out familiar sounds in languages he didn't know. Walking along St. Catherine Street in a crowd, he had a fond sense of owning it all, of belonging. He saw proud, busty women who looked like Catherine Deneuve at twenty, with gay silk scarves and pants like slightly erratic jodphurs bunched at the tops of boots as tight as puttees. Urban equestrian, he thought, pleased with himself. He was charmed by it all: the city was sensual, elegant, his.

He walked with the crowd, which spilled from the curbs at each intersection until it squeezed off the narrow flow of cars.

But at Guy Street the traffic was fast and unintimidated. While he waited for the light he was startled to hear a voice so close that it might have come from the shopping bag. Glancing down, he saw a small man whose shoulders slumped defensively forward under an old lumber jacket, his indifferent eyes peering at Harmon's chest.

"Change?"

Harmon fumbled a few coins out of his pocket and slapped them into the bum's hand. He was used to being singled out by panhandlers and had watched them break into a clumsy trot just to catch up with him and beg for a handout. But he felt he had learned to accept that kind of annoyance with good grace. It happened because people trusted him; and he thought of it as his business to be trusted. In Toronto there had been office girls who confided in him so often that he began to feel wise and aloof. They jokingly referred to him as "Father Harmon," but he thought the image was just right and wore it as a comfortable vestment of his personality.

He turned right off St. Catherine just past the busiest part of the shopping district. The janitor sitting on an upended concrete block at the entrance to his apartment building motioned for him to sit down and talk but Harmon opened one hand in abbreviated recognition of the old man and walked inside. When he was promoted to the Montreal office the company told him that they had rented a bachelor apartment for him in a new building (a "high-rise colony" someone had explained) close to the western terminus of the Metro. But when he arrived

he found the apartment still busy with finish carpenters and without any furniture. Instead of asking the company to put him up at a hotel Harmon went to see rooms that had been advertised for a weekly rate. Walking along the high balconies in the old building he couldn't avoid glancing through the venetian blinds into the dozens of tiny apartments, seeing the artifacts of hundreds of lives through the tilted metal slats. His apartment would not be finished for at least another week so he took a room, knowing that the people from work would be horrified if they knew where he had decided to stay. He thought of himself as a classless man, as comfortable with an electrician in an after-hours bar as he was with an engineer at an industry seminar.

Harmon smiled into the building manager's office as he walked past it to the inner courtyard, which was slanted from its edges toward a drain hole in the centre, like a wading pool for children in a public park. He was startled to see that someone had thrown a bag of garbage to the flagstones from an upper balcony and when the bag hit it had scattered bits of hair and odd pieces of bone. He stepped around the mess and followed the spiralling black staircase to his own floor.

On the bureau in his apartment he had arranged a display of market reports, tech sheets and advertising brochures. The folders intersected with the covers of magazines beneath them and made a haphazard collage of brightly banded resistors, large print, schematic diagrams, and white limbs and breasts.

The front leaf of one folder showed an integrated circuit mounted on tiny silver pins like the legs of an insect. Its ceramic top had been shaved off to reveal a thousand intricate circuit pathways, like a topographical map of an alien city. Minute beads and threads of silicon formed a glinting metallic relief crosshatched with silver roads so narrow that they shone with diffracted light: chrome red streets, arctic blue landscape.

Harmon picked up a brochure and a handful of magazines. The smell of fedde and shortbread coming from the grocery bag brought back the pleasure of his afternoon walk. I am happy to be here, he thought.

When the telphone rang he thought it might be the office, but then remembered that he hadn't given them his number. It was an undecipherable hour of the night; an outside hall light glowed dimly through the crack around his door transom. His hand found the receiver and as soon as he lifted it he could hear someone speaking. It was impenetrably rapid, slurred and loud.

"What?"

Dial tone. He returned the receiver to its cradle and the phone rang again. Harmon, holding the blaring receiver away from his ear, tried to explain that he didn't understand. But they were laughing on the other end and so he left the phone off the hook and covered it with an extra pillow.

In the morning he woke to the sound of the rattling slide

chain as someone tried to push open the door to his apartment. He felt his body go rigid with panic until the calm tapping of a woman's footsteps on the iron stairs outside restored his sense of security. He threw the covers off and called to the door that he was coming.

"Hallo there," Harmon heard. "Sorry you got hassled with the phone last night but they were just trying to call me here." Harmon dragged his pants on and stepped into his shoes barefoot. Who? he wanted to ask. How did they know my number? The door pushed open another inch and a six-pack of Labatt's laced together with white plastic was pushed through. The door closed again.

"Wait," Harmon called as he undid the chain. When he opened the door he had to stop himself from laughing in surprise. His visitor stared evenly at him and then past him into the apartment. A wooden tiki god with hollow eyes peered blankly out from the open collar of his fringed shirt. He wore jeans which looked pegged at the top but were so short they failed to cover the tops of tooled leather boots whose patches of stain had faded to watery greys and pinks.

"I'm Kevin."

Harmon blinked at him.

"I'll visit you later, eh? I'm looking for work today. Spent almost my last two dollars on that beer." He pulled the top pockets of his flannel shirt inside out to demonstrate and tufts of lint fell from the seams.

"What's your work?" Harmon asked.

Kevin snorted and laughed and turned away. He disappeared into the apartment next door.

A cowboy, Harmon thought. But he could already feel his annoyance turning to sympathy. If this kid was looking for a job, if he could get him to sit down and talk about it, he might be able to help.

In the evening, before bed, a loud bang startled Harmon from his magazine. He thought that he must have left the beer too close to the stove and that a can had exploded. Then another crash shook the wall, followed by a broken chorus of harsh laughter.

Harmon got up to put his ear against the rough plaster and blocked his other ear with the palm of his hand. He heard a crackling sound and indistinct voices. He stepped into the closet to listen, hoping that the wall between the two apartments would be thinner there. He shoved his clothes to one side and sat on a briefcase to dampen the rustling sounds. He held his breath to stop the sound of his own breathing. Blood clot, he tell me ... He crept out of the closet and took a plastic water glass from the kitchenette shelf, returning to invert it against the wall. Lookit she go ... A radio roared with static and he drew his ear sharply away from the bottom of the glass. Mu'fuckah radio ... He thought he recognized Kevin's voice.

Harmon quickly dressed and collected his remaining groceries. He put three cans of beer into the bag to help give it bulk. He listened at Kevin's door for a moment before

knocking.

"My fuckin' radio's bust," Kevin said as he opened the door. Harmon followed him into the yellow, high-ceilinged room and looked for a place to put the groceries down. The table held a dusty record player with a built-in radio which hissed quietly, built to a howl, and then subsided. Before Harmon could explain himself, Kevin stepped behind a room divider made from a paisley bedspread.

Harmon didn't know if he should follow. He tried to be discreet about looking at three people who lay sleeping on a mattress pushed up against the far wall. A moonfaced girl materialized from behind the partition and smiled at him when he handed her the groceries. She shook her hair away from the sides of her face as she emptied the bag and Harmon watched the liquid movement this gave to her breasts, under her cotton peasant blouse. He moved as close to her as he could, gratuitously folding the empty shopping bag while she sliced fruit and opened boxes of cereal.

"We're on shares here," the girl told him.

"I can take a look at your radio," Harmon offered when Kevin stepped out from behind the curtain.

"Use your telephooone," Kevin sang outside his door.

Harmon was preoccupied with business. He had had lunch with the representative of a Fairchild subsidiary who asked about the local interest in a portable video-camera system they wanted to market. Harmon's company might be able to

lease the patent so that the production facilities could qualify for Canadian corporate tax status. There had been no prices on the menu at the Fairchild rep's club and Harmon took this as the first move in a long sparring match of intimidation and one-upmanship before contracts were signed.

The door knob rattled. He could ignore it but there was always the possibility that Kevin might see him leave the room later. He got up, noisily undid the slide chain and sat back down. Kevin pushed the door open. He looked to both sides of the room and shoved his fingers through his hair as though there were something caught in it. Pointing at the telephone beside Harmon, he said he had to call about a job. But when Harmon said yes, Kevin closed the door and leaned against it.

"You know those people at my place?" Kevin asked.

Harmon pushed his work aside. He knew that if he wanted to visit Kevin's apartment later in the evening, he should listen now.

"One of those guy's is a fuckin' con man. He came by every night with a pizza for us. Then I get one day's work and when I come back home he's moved into my place like I owe it to him. He's a con man just like the dudes I met in prison."

Harmon opened his eyes in mild surprise and nodded. He trusts me, he thought.

"Back in Winnipeg," Kevin went on. All his jittery watchfulness seemed to have left him. He sat on the bed, resting one booted foot on the table and the other on the silver radiator fins.

"See these scars," he said. He pushed his shirt sleeve up and pointed to a line of raised crescents of skin on forearm. "I did that with a spoon. If you could get into the prison infirmary, the nurse'd go down on you."

You're lying, Harmon thought. He stared at Kevin's smooth face.

The telephone rang and Harmon reached to answer it. Kevin held up an open palm. "Cool," he said, picking up the receiver. He turned his face away, holding the receiver couched between his chin and left shoulder so that he seemed to be speaking to an invisible listened sitting beside him in the chair.

"My waitress," he explained, hanging up. He told Harmon that she worked at a restaurant where he had applied for a job as a busboy, on Cote de Liesse, which he pronounced Coda Leesee. "And the first thing I'm gonna do when I get me a job is to buy one of these," he said, tapping the telephone.

Harmon explained that the phone was rented for a monthly service charge.

"You mean you can't take it with you when you move and plug it in?"

Harmon smiled. It was hard to believe anyone could be so naive about something so simple. He told Kevin that the phone company had to turn each unit on from a central switchpoint and that they could even see how many phones were on a line by measuring the amount of current drawn by the bell coils.

"Jesus. I really needed to know all that, didn't I," Kevin said. Then, grinning, he picked up the phone again.

"Watch. I'll show you everything I need to know." As he dialed each digit he made an impatient flourish with his wrist.

Harmon forced himself to smile as Kevin spoke.

"Where am I calling from? This dude, this friend of mine, lets me use his phone ... Bill ... the guy with the weird groceries. You met him the other night." Kevin, grinning at Harmon, covered the mouthpiece as if his smile were audible. "She wants to talk to you," he said.

"What does she want?"

"I dunno. She wants to know how tall you are."

Harmon took the receiver. The girl's voice was bright and aggressive.

"When you brought the groceries I wanted to ask you how tall you were," she said. "But I was too shy."

When he told her she said she couldn't believe it, that no one was that tall.

"I'll measure you myself when I see you," she said.

Harmon glanced at Kevin, who was fidgeting again. He wondered if this girl was a prostitute and Kevin her pimp. If that was the case then this was just another transaction, but he'd been too slow to see it.

"What do you do?" she asked.

"I make money," Harmon said, allowing his voice to drop a little.

"A lot?"

She was unbelievable. Unabashed hard sell.

"Oh, Jesus, yes, a lot," he teased. I like you, he thought.

When she said that she had to go and thanked him again for the groceries, Harmon was too surprised to say goodbye. He held the receiver for another minute until he saw Kevin watching. "As soon as I can," he said into the dead mouthpiece, and hung up.

"What'd she say?" Kevin demanded.

Harmon's answer was interrupted by a series of hard little knocks that jerked the apartment door open. A young black man standing with his arms held akimbo grinned coyly in at them. He pursed his lips and shook his head at Kevin in an accusatory way. His hair hung in tight coils that shivered like steel springs.

"I knew I find you somewhere," he said, his voice a shrill whine.

"This," said Kevin, "is Freddy. You must of seen him crashed out on the floor when you were in my apartment."

Harmon put his hand out and started to push himself out of his chair but when Freddy turned away from him he absently brushed at the bedspread and sat back down. Freddy picked up the phone and started to dial. After the first few numbers he stopped and asked Kevin, "This OK?"

"Ask the man," Kevin told him.

Harmon waved his hand indulgently. He listened as a call was made to convince someone to show up for an audition of Freddy's band. Freddy's voices scaled upwards and cracked. He slammed the receiver down and rested his hands on his hips, his elbows jutting forward in a show of resignation.

They're children, Harmon thought.

"No show," Freddie said.

Harmon quietly asked what kind of music his band played.

"Soul, disco, reggae, you know."

"Do you get a lot of work?"

"Gigs every weekend,"

"Is there a large black community here?"

Freddy looked at Kevin as though he were waiting for an interpretation.

"A what?"

"A black community. Jamaicans. Bahamians." How to explain something so simple?

"I don't know where the black community is," Freddy said.

"It doesn't have to <u>be</u> any place."

"He wants to know if you only play for coloreds," Kevin said, grinning.

"That's not it!" Harmon objected.

"Say, I remember you now," Freddy said. "You brought some food over for us the other day. Just like the Red Cross. But I guess you can afford it, eh? You got a briefcase and all those papers. Shit, I bet you're not even thirty yet."

Harmon shrugged and shook his head. These people were beyond his help; beyond anyone's help.

"Kevin, I got an idea," Freddy said. "Maybe we can get this dude to help us with the rent until you get your job. Would he do that?"

Kevin shook his head.

"Oh yeah? Can I have one of these?" Freddy ran his finger across the surface of one of the glossy advertising brochures that lay open on the bureau.

"Take it."

When Freddy left, Kevin swung his feet off the bed and stretched so hard that Harmon could hear his joints pop. "One thing," he said. "Before I get this job I need a reference and I wanted you to phone them for me. You mind that?"

Harmon nodded and took down the number of the restaurant. He got up to close the door after Kevin and then sat down beside the phone. When he picked it up the receiver felt clumsy and somehow dangerous. He couldn't bring himself to put it against his ear. He dialed one number to quiet the droning dial tone and left the line open while he took his clothes from the closet and packed them into his suitcase.

St. Catherine Street east of Guy still glittered warmly when he went out to hail a cab. He stepped into the street to avoid three drunks sitting in a drugstore window on the corner but one of the men stood up and approached him.

Got a quarter sir?

I remember you.

Huh.

I gave you money before.

People give me ... all the time.

You don't deserve it.

The old man swore at him so suddenly and with such impersonal disdain that as Harmon rushed away from him into the

street, he had to look back to make sure he was leaving him behind.

II.

Right after you get out on the street again it's hard not to feel like you're covered with something that tells people, Jail. The bums know it well enough that they don't even try and hit on me. One of them pushes off of his window ledge and circles a lady coming out of Steinberg's with a full grocery cart and a kid hanging on her sleeve. She gets to her car and stops to give him a dollar in an absent-minded way like she's paying sales tax. But when I pass she keeps her eye on her kid, like I might be up to something.

They've never had to take down the tin Chambre à louer sign that's stuck over the door to this building where I've been living. We're always moving. The window in my room is over the alley where the janitor keeps the garbage cans and even it's occupied. The alley is boarded off but on cold nights the bums rip the boards off so they'll have a place to sleep. In the mornings the janitor kicks them out and wakes me up when he starts driving in more nails. Then the bums knock it all out again.

I could do myself a favour and share a room with someone up in the student ghetto or move into one of those row houses farther west on Pine or Cote des Neiges. Or I could move in with Flack down in Little Burgundy - but I'm no

Jamaican. When he gets high I can't understand him. Flack goes on, Ta-ba-nak! he yells. Blood clot, I fuck she, he says. When he talks to me on the phone he gets so excited that I have to get his lady to translate for me. And after I've spent the day with him, I pick it up. Then I go talk to some straight dude in a hiring office who looks at me like I'm a lost cause because I can't speak French and my English sounds like I'm from Trinidad.

The front door of this building I live in is always open. The janitor sits on a concrete block out front hoping to trap someone into talking with him. But I ignore him because I've got more important things to do. As I pass inside I just hope that Mrs. Gagnon hasn't seen me.

"M'sieur," she calls. I keep on going. "Monsieur. Three-oh-eight! You come here. I have to have a word with you."

Mrs. Gagnon talks to people like she's playing a tape. There's the rent's late tape, you left your lights on again when you went out tape, you make too much noise tape, your dog's shat in the hall again tape.

"Three-oh-eight," she says. "We have to talk." I expect the rent tape.

"If you won't call me three-oh-eight, I won't call you bureau," I tell her. She laughs like a nervous girl.

"Mister, there are too many people in your room. I have in my books for one, but I count two, three, four in there. The rent will have to be more."

"I'll get rid of them."

"And the rent?"

I tell her that I just got a job, but not that I probably just lost it because I had to spend the day in jail, and she lets me go. How do I get away with that? She dresses the Pakis down if they're an hour late and standing in front of her with the rent money in their hands.

My apartment door is still unlocked. There's ashes and garbage on the bed, the fridge and oven are both open, the blanket's wadded up under the table and each empty drawer in my bureau is hanging out like a tongue.

When the detectives woke us up this morning one of them took Freddy and I outside while the other one banged around in our apartment. I know there's no sympathy for anyone in their work. We hate their guts and they know it; they don't even think of us as human beings and we know it. The detectives joked around and accused each other of missing obvious hiding places. They poured milk down the drain to get a better look inside the container and they fished around with their fingers in the sugar bowl. They even took apart the radio, doing their best to imagine that we are clever crooks and they are smarter cops. When we were packed away in the back seat of their car - they didn't have the brains to think of calling for a regular van - they asked questions like, How long have you been in Montreal? Is it warmer here than it is in Winnipeg?

They said they were looking for a tape player and a new pair of hi-fi speakers that were ripped off from someone's car while he was over at the Stork Club. All they found in

the apartment was a bag of clothes that Freddy and I took from Bob when he wouldn't pay us rent for the week he crashed here. Bob stole the clothes from Eaton's, but there was no way the cops could tell that.

While I'm still trying to pick up after the detectives I hear Freddy coming along the balcony, singing, and slapping his hands against the wall. He's from Montreal but he spends his time with the Jamaicans and says he's a Rasta-man. He's chosen, he tells me. The slapping gets closer. I hear

Intensified boys
with hearts full of joys,
Intensified girls
with those fancy curls

and it sounds wrong because of his accent, but good

I said pressure drop,
oh pressure
Pressure goin' to drop
on you, you, you...

and clear enough to sing in a choir. But when he talks his voice cracks like it hasn't changed yet. He's my only good friend here.

"Bob did it to us," Freddy says, stopping at the door. The police let him go before me. He's shorter than I am and strung very tight. His dreadlocks are shaking and bouncing, making him look like a black puppet.

"I don't think you understand. It...is...Bob. I told you not to let him move in here. I told you that, didn't I? I said couldn't trust him."

I tell Freddy to bugger off. I don't need to be nagged. But he tells me that Linda, at the Stork Club, said it was

Bob who stole the hi-fi parts the cops were looking for. Then Bob phoned the police and said that Freddy and I had them.

"He did it to us for taking that bag of clothes off of him," Freddy says, and when I don't say anything he stomps off screeching something about killing Bob. When I hear him yelling up on the next floor I step out onto the balcony for a better look. I can see Bob standing still, holding a huge pizza box, and Freddy threatening him.

"Come on motherfucker," Freddy squeaks, shaking and twitching himself into the right mood. "Come on blood clot, come at me. Before you get here I take you off at the knees. You think I can't fight? You think I can't take you fuckin' greaseball, c'mon."

Bob continues to be very cool about it. I think that if someone gets shoved over the balcony and gets his head bust it would probably be better for me if I weren't around. But I know that Bob can take Freddy. I don't want to get anyone excited so I go up the stairs easy.

"Come on <u>me</u>, mu'fucker," Bob says. "Come on me and I'll shove this whole fuckin' pizza down your throat. You wouldn't even fight with me against the guy in the Stork."

I see Freddy stop dancing around.

"What guy?"

"At the Stork."

"<u>What guy</u>, motherfucker?"

"At the table."

"No way man. There's no way I'm gonna fight a black guy

with you."

"What about a Frenchman?"

"I'll fight a Frenchman with you motherfucker."

When I come up to them they both stare at me as if I'd just come from outer space. It's plain to me that Bob has already got him conned. I start to ask about why he called the cops on us but give it up because I can see that Freddy's got no steam left.

Downstairs, I finish cleaning up the apartment. There's no one around to see so I go to the apartment next door and knock out the transom and crawl over. The guy who lived here left it just as neat as I expected him to. There's a few plates and glasses in the cupboard which I'll help myself to on the way out. But first I check to make sure that his telephone is still connected. I call one of the girls I know to tell her about my crazy day. Then I call work and discover that I'm lucky - one of the waitresses covered for me and told the boss that I'd called in sick in the morning.

I jam the transom back into place from the inside and unlock the door. When I go back to my place, I find Bob and Freddy waiting for me, eating pizza. Bob is all stretched out on the mattress. Freddy leans against the fridge, a wool cap pulled down over his dreadlocks.

"Freddy and I ironed it out," Bob says. "I'm moving back in here. As long as I already paid you the rent with them clothes you took off me. Since you got a job you'll be gone all day and you'll never know I'm here."

Freddy pulls his cap back off his face. He starts squeaking that Bob's going to pay us rent this time. Bob starts to look ugly to me, like a tub of guts. I get my razor out of the bathroom, my hairbrush and lighter from the dresser, unplug the radio and wrap the cord around it. They wonder what I'm doing when I walk out. Next door, the apartment seems to open up for me before I can even push the door.

A Member of the Department

On the day of the welcoming party Marge let him sleep in until it was almost too late for him to see her off. When he woke, clothes surrounded her feet on the floor and she was lifting her arms in the air to let a bright cotton blouse fall like an opening accordion over her shoulders. She tugged the blouse straight and made a pleased half-turn in front of a tall mirror on the closet door.

"That's an old blouse," he said, meaning that he remembered the second hand store where she bought it. He thought that Marge had thrown most of those things out before they moved. They had been married through a year of college, two graduate schools and a post-doctoral fellowship, so they knew second hand stores and junk shops well.

"You bum," Marge said. "How long have you been awake?"

When she stepped over the pile of clothes and bent to kiss him goodbye, he reached under her blouse and pressed his hand to her flat, cool stomach. She left her eyes open as she kissed him. When she drew away he could see tiny creases like

paper cuts at the corners of her mouth and eyes. He felt sorry for her, as if these new lines on her face were, through some kind of neglect, his fault. And it made him sad to see her in the bright old blouse. He liked to imagine her in well-cut tweed suits and solid colored gabardine skirts, exactly the kind of clothes he would soon be able to buy for her. He wanted to apologize.

"I should give you a baby," he said, stroking the soft skin on her stomach. "It's still not too late."

She watched him in a neutral, distant way until he shrugged helplessly. "I have to get back to the clickety-clack," she said, annoying him with the nonsense word she used for the office where she had been working since they moved. She stepped back from the bed so she could see him better. "And besides, I've decided to go back to school." She smiled again and the lines reappeared.

"Jesus, you don't have to do that."

"Clickety-clack."

He heard her heels tapping smartly on the floor as she left the room and he threw the pillow weakly in her direction. He hoped she hadn't seen him throw it.

"Why school?"

Her voice, distracted, answered from the living room. "It's not too late." Her footsteps became softer and disappeared when she was on the rug.

"But you'll just be another faculty wife taking classes," he yelled toward the barely muffled rumble of their old

Plymouth's engine. He imagined her sitting in a classroom, her head full of office gossip, surrounded by younger and brighter minds, not understanding a thing.

Lifting himself slowly from the bed - he hadn't realized Ohio could be this hot - he put his feet on the gritty wood floor and waited for a moment's dizziness to pass before standing up. He picked up yesterday's clothes which, limply damp and smelling of cold sweat, seemed to have been worn all night by someone else and just returned to the back of the wooden chair beside the bed. The shirt and pants dragged over his skin as he pulled them on.

Since there was no food in the house he drank two glasses of water for breakfast and carried a third to the unscreened front porch where he could sit in a canvas lawn chair and plan his day. Just having a one year, full-time contract was a hopeful sign; that the psychology department had somehow arranged for him to rent a house that the college owned was even more incredible luck. He knew that he should be concerned about the tiny and probably inbred population of subjects that the town could provide him with, about video tape facilities and student assistants and computer time, but it was hard to worry. If he could somehow produce two or three first-author papers and have them in press by the end of the year, it would guarantee his contract renewal. It was impossible not to dream of tenure. Tonight, at least, he would find out where he stood.

During the month before Labor Day, Val had stayed away from the campus except for a few unavoidable visits to the Dean's office to sign contracts and pick up insurance forms. He knew that he wouldn't really feel like a member of the department until the fall term started and the residence halls filled with students. Yet, when he walked across the campus to eat lunch at the student cafeteria, everything he saw looked familiar. The white, federalist houses presiding over the older parts of the campus, the boxy student union with the austere, Saarinen look of the fifties and the single new building with bold acrylic panels and rounded plexiglas skylights sprouting from the roof were all as predictable as a shopping centre. Even the advertising brochures in the Dean's office boasted to parents of prospective students that the college's curriculum had barely changed in thirty years and that not one hour of class had ever been lost because of student demonstrations or labor problems.

He found the bookstore on the first floor of the student union and, already anxious to establish his authority, knocked on the door to the manager's office and then walked in to ask for book order forms. In the halls outside the bookstore he leafed through some dittoed flyers on air pollution, whales and nuclear power. The slick white paper and gassy residue of duplicating fluid always had the power to recall to him the first fall days at any school, when anticipation, fear,

and the smells of floury paste, wet clothing and chalk dust became inseparable. Upstairs in the cafeteria he stood in a line of students who were renewing friendships from the previous spring. Without graduate students or evening students, it was a much younger looking group than those at the university he had just left. The dining area was crowded but he found a small round table where he could watch students carrying their full trays from the cafeteria line and returning the empty trays to a conveyer belt which whisked them from sight. He was sure that the students could identify him as an outsider and he wondered if the faculty would have the same clannish similarity in their faces as the students.

He first saw the campus during the last, unhappy year of part-time teaching, just before they moved. That year, he had spent all his salary and most of Marge's savings from her bank job flying to conventions, having hundreds of copies of his curriculum vitae typed and mailed, and waiting to be interviewed at colleges where the departmental secretary had forgotten to remind faculty that they were scheduled to speak with him. At other times he would receive a summons to meet a member of the department in the evening at a bar, or at a Holiday Inn in the morning, to discuss his qualifications over a plate of heavy pancakes covered with acrid maple syrup. And once he had been invited to a party at a faculty member's house where he was introduced as the new member of the department. But the next morning the departmental secretary had barred him from an audience with the chairman who was, she said,

"busy interviewing applicants." And yet, when he was finally hired at this small private college, it was only after a brief interview with two faculty members, followed a month later by a letter of confirmation signed in a secretarial hand, " for Dr. Michael Dodd."

Often, returning defeated from a convention or an interview, he would tell Marge how stupid and self-important professors were, how petty their complaints, and how undeserved their privileged jobs. He told her about professors who were bored by their professions, who abandoned their classes to student assistants, or were simply drunken incompetents. It was impossible to understand why she would want to go back to school. Looking back, it sometimes seemed that the years it had taken to get a job teaching had been an entire waste.

Val had eaten less than half his sandwich, and by the time he pried the brittle lid from his styrofoam cup, the coffee inside was cold and tasted of plastic. He wanted to go home. Picking up the tray with its thick ironstone plate and crumpled plastic wrappings, he followed a tall blond girl wearing heels and a long-skirted suit which made her look more like an office manager than a student. As they converged to put their trays through the same narrow window onto the conveyer belt, she stopped abruptly and called out to someone in the long queue still winding in front of the serving counter. Val bumped lightly into her shoulder and heard her small burst of surprised laughter. The girl turned and looked at him. "I'm sorry, professor," she said.

"But I'm not," Val started to reply, then stopped himself, realizing how foolish he would sound asking the girl not to call him professor." Her clear, patient expression as she waited for him to speak filled him with alarm.

The chairman had an extravagantly bushy mustache and sometimes sounded as if he were trying to affect an English accent. Val felt Dodd's hand release his almost as soon as they touched and instead of shaking hands with Marge he took a step back and stared at her with wide-eyed exaggeration. He took in her sandals and skirt and then smiled at her brightly embroidered peasant blouse. "Are you in uniform or mufti?" he asked, still pretending to be astonished.

Marge began to stammer in a way that made Val want to rush protectively between them.

"Ten years ago, all my students looked like you," Dodd told her. "But now you've come back to take over the department." He took Marge's hand and pressed it in his as if he were offering condolences. Her face was bright with shy pleasure. When Dodd asked her what she did to fill her time, Val was afraid that Marge would tell him she was planning to take classes, and he would have something else to humiliate her with.

"I just work," she said.

Dodd answered with an unfocussed smile and saw them to the edge of the party, where he excused himself and, scooping a file folder from a telephone table, disappeared up an

unlighted staircase.

"His accent is fake," Val said.

In the past, they would have drifted toward the graduate students on the perimeter of the party and allowed themselves into its social centre only when they had been conducted there. But now there didn't seem to be a receptive corner in the room. He searched for the faces of the two faculty members who had interviewed him during the winter. The room was full of the decorative fixtures of academic life - a bay window crowded with flowers and leaves under the bushy tendrils of a hanging spider plant, bearded professors in cotton blue jeans and suede shoes, leather and velveteen unholstery, and an aggressively friendly purebred dog. Driving to the party, he and Marge had played what they long ago named "The Professor Game":

"Rattan window blinds."

"Third world artifacts but no African sculpture."

"Modular stereo."

"Nope. Quad. Four speakers."

"Two points for that one."

"Beer signs."

"Barber shop pole."

"Bols liqueur in a partially refinished cherrywood cabinet."

"Encyclopaedia Britannica."

"No. How gauche. You know?"

"Art books printed in Switzerland or Italy on the same shelf."

"Pot shop in the basement."

"A wife twenty years younger who used to be his student."

Marge laughed in surprise. "That's it! You've got it! I yield."

Yet it was Marge who had come up with the most difficult variation to predict. Somewhere, often in the bathroom, there would be what they called a concession to modesty. The tub would be a pitted enamel ball and claw affair, too decrepit to be called antique, with rust stains under the faucets. The toilet would leak or sweat so badly that the linoleum underneath was crumbly with rot. The chrome on the faucets would be flaking so that you cut yourself trying to turn the water on and off. It's as if, Marge had said, they want to let everyone know that when it comes down to the hard facts of dirt and digestion and the human condition, they're just the same as everyone else.

"We may be a country college, but we're not dangerous," Val heard at his back. When he turned toward the voice he saw the two men who had interviewed him, each holding thick-stemmed beer glasses with a rim of white froth at the top.

"You don't have to hide even if Dodd installed you here himself," one of the professors said. He burped into his beard, trying unsuccessfully to cover it with his hand. A small bubble of beer foam, suspended in the wiry hair, burst.

"We read your CV and we couldn't resist it," he said,

combing his beard with his fingers. "While Dodd was away, we figured we could sneak one in on him." The professor said this in an explanatory tone to Marge, who nodded gratefully.

"One?" she asked.

"One in your husband's field," the professor said. "The students have been petitioning for someone in social psychology for a couple of years now. He even beat out a fellow who's just completed two years of post-doc at Rockefeller."

"There's what you'd call a divided opinion in our department," the other professor said. He tugged at the edges of his lapel with his thumb and forefinger. "You should know there's someone on your side."

The professor with the beard was twisting it into tight little circles around his finger and Val could see tension lifting the corners of his mouth into a taut smile.

"There were over 250 applications for your position," he heard one of them say. "We should have dinner this weekend."

It did not seem so much an invitation as a threat, but before Val could say anything, Marge said they would be happy to go. Instead of answering, both professors looked toward the stairs.

"Mrs. Boss," one of them half-whispered.

When Val turned around he saw a pair of knees in dark hose which seemed to be dumbly watching them from behind the balusters rimming the staircase. Marge caught his stuck gaze and turned sharply, as if she expected to see a dangling spider. Val looked up and saw an amused and pretty face (Old

enough to have a doctorate and a job? A secretary? Someone's daughter?) looking down at him. In a gilt-rimmed mirror hung on the wall behind her he could see that she was holding a drink behind her back. Her warm laughter tumbled over the balustrade.

"I'm not really a Peeping Tom," the woman said. "On the way down the stairs the room started to get a bit spinny, you know? So I thought I'd just try to hang on here for a minute and look elegant."

"You look just fine," one of the professors said.

"Thank you Jerry." She grinned at them. "I shall not sample when I mix the punch next time," she said, unsteadily holding out her glass.

"Since none of you are gate crashers, one of you must be our new faculty member, right?" She tentatively offered her hand over the railing and the movement brought Val a premonition of her scent. It was Jamaican patchouli oil, gin, and somehow, the smell of her own skin. "Which is Val?" she asked.

"Me," Val said, quickly extending his hand.

"And this must be Mrs. Me?" The woman nodded toward Marge, who offered her hand only warily and without volunteering her name.

"I'm Mrs. Dodd," the other woman said.

Val made an estimate of her age and subtracted it from what he imagined to be Dodd's forty-five or fifty years. He would have to find out if she had been Dodd's student. He looked for the same sort of recognition in Marge and when she

failed to give him even a tiny glance of complicity, decided that she must have forgotten his winning point in "The Professor Game."

"You," Mrs. Dodd commanded, "must come up to the brain room and speak to Michael." When Val asked what she meant she gave an exaggerated look of annoyance and pointed up the dark stairway behind her. "The study," she said. "You can see what he does with his sabbaticals." She pronounced the last word with an English accent, but neither of the professors laughed.

Mrs. Dodd waited for Val to reach the step she was standing on and walked up beside him, on hand resting lightly on his arm. He could feel her fingers through his shirt helping correct her balance as she mounted each step. And at the top of the stairs she stopped to catch her breath as if she'd run up. Val, still holding his arm out for her, had to stop. She was very drunk.

"Here," she said. The single syllable sounded very heavy on the close, darkened landing. Then, as if she were helping him towards the door, Mrs. Dodd put her arm around Val's waist and tried to step forward.

"I think I can make it," Val said. Yet her thigh pushed softly against his. He didn't want to let her go.

Mrs. Dodd, instead of drawing away from him, swung both arms around his waist and pulled him towards her. She seemed to be using him for support but he felt her lips lightly pass over the side of his face. Whether it had been a kiss, an accident or a warning, he couldn't tell. She swore and pushed

herself away from him and the absence of her weight on his chest made him want her.

"Come in," he heard Dodd call from behind the door at the end of the hall. Mrs. Dodd swore again and found the top step on the stairs. Before opening the door to the study, Val softly told her to be careful, but she seemed not to hear.

Dodd's study was almost as dark as the landing, with indirect lighting from fluorescent panels in the ceiling glowing on the established looking browns of the furniture. Dodd sat a a roll-top desk in the centre of the windowless room. A low plexiglas showcase that looked like it had been built into the frame of a sideboard reflected a dim light from its polished surface. The far wall at Dodd's back supported a rectangular, framed graph labeled "Comparative Brain Mass," but its darkly stained wooden border made the graph look like one of those sepia maps with the four winds and the seasons personified above the continents.

Pushing the door closed, Val saw on the wall beside it a box of the sort that he had seen displaying religious pamphlets in bus stations. He held back a sheet of the glossily white paper. It was an offprint from Science magazine. Another leaning sheaf of papers was offprints from Nature.

"My vanity," Dodd said. "It's well-known around here." He leaned back in his tilting office chair and laced his fingers together across his chest. As he lowered his head a small second chin appeared. "Noblesse oblige," he added, chuckling in a way that shook his whole frame and made him look like a

well-dressed Santa Claus.

Nervous because Dodd had not asked him to sit down, Val walked to the plexiglas showcase and, careful to keep his hands away from the unscratched plastic surface, bent down to examine the small, softly pink lumps of something which reminded him of chewed bubble gum. But then it became clear that he was looking at a small regiment of brains and brain fragments, each labeled in black India ink with its own five-digit number. The end of the display case was crowded with lumpy pink chunks and partially assembled plastic anatomical models with smooth surface corrugations and red and grey labeling. It looked like one of those bright glass boxes of trinkets at county fairs, with a coin-operated miniature crane for lifting out some small treasure.

"That's not the real thing, is it?" Val asked, knowing he sounded stupid but feeling as well that Dodd would think that of him no matter what he said.

"That would make it quite the cannibal's meat market, wouldn't it?" Dodd said, sounding as if he were pleased to have rediscovered a joke he'd forgotten while he was on sabbatical. "But that's the bias of our department, you see. We're strictly empirical. It's not that we don't welcome you with open arms, it's just that we don't do <u>social</u> psychology." He unlaced his fingers and pushed himself upright in the office chair.

"I'm being indirect. The thing is, I can't imagine you'll be happy working in this department. We're not set up to handle

your kind of work or your way of thinking. It's just something the students wanted. If I'd been here I don't even think your post would have been filled."

Val tried to remember the actual signing of his contract and imagined the copy in the dean's office blank, unsigned, invalid.

"But as long as you're here, I'm sure you appreciate the fact that I'm happy the dean came up with the money for your position. After all, it's easier to subtract positions than it is to add them. Perhaps at the end of the year we might even be able to find something part-time for you in sociology. But it won't be tenure-track, of course."

Val saw two framed paintings of the federalist houses bordering the campus. They were done in wash in a simple, realistic style and he wondered if they were Dodd's or his wife's.

"And the equipment budget for the fall has already been parcelled out, so unless you come up with grants of your own, we'll have to see if we can reach some kind of compromise with the department secretary about cutting back on staples. But," he laughed, "she's a hard bargainer."

An air conditioner snapped on and the sudden draft made Val shiver, adding to the weightlessness and desire that Mrs. Dodd had left him with. Her touch had made him feel somehow implicated in this setting, as if she were his wife, Dodd's display cases, offprints, paintings and heavy furniture, his also. And it was as if he were sitting behind the roll-top desk, anxious for the evening to be over, the interview to end.

The lock on the door to Dodd's room made an incisive little click as Val pushed it closed. The landing was so damp and close that he could feel his fingers tackily sticking to his damp palms. The party was reflected up to him at an acute angle in the gilt-edged mirror hung above the bottom few steps. In its centre he saw Mrs. Dodd, her dress open to the small of her back. She reached behind herself and with a whisking motion of her fingers that made her look as though she were secretly waving, she scratched her shoulder blade. Then, as if positioning herself so that he could see better, Mrs. Dodd turned sideways and Marge became visible. He couldn't see who was in front of her, but she was laughing. The sound, except for its brightest notes, was lost in the other party noises. She had always said she hated faculty parties but, he realized, had never before been able to think of herself as part of the department. And he saw that it was only natural for her to form new alliances with Mrs. Dodd and the two professors and that the next time they went to a faculty party that he couldn't expect her to play "The Professor Game."

For a moment, Val felt his hopefulness return, but when he heard Dodd's chair squeak in the room behind him, he forgot the image in the mirror and went down the dark stairs to join his wife.

A Reasonable Man

When the bell rang, Ollie Keller looked up at the empty, terraced rows of desks beyond his lectern and wondered if he had done something wrong. Already, through the tall casement windows that leaned open over the campus, he could hear them chanting and laughing. When a student came to the door, looked around it and tapped inquisitively on the glass, he waved her away. He walked to the window but the embrasure was so deep, all he could see was one large placard calling for the defeat of the Phalange waving over the heads of an invisible crowd. He tried to find a way to express to himself why he found it so distasteful. It's none of their business, he thought.

Ollis had come straight to Boston from an Ohio village where his father owned the hardware store. During the worst years of the Depression, the town shrank from the outside world, loading less corn and soy onto the siding at the co-op and removing the gingerbread from under the eaves of their houses until they could afford the paint to keep it all looking

proper and fresh.

Friends of Ollie's father started calling Ollie "professor" while he was still a student - because he drove to the university in Columbus every day as if it were a real job, and because they knew he studied insects. It was plain that only a professor could see insects as something other than pests that ruined the work of a year's farming and grace them with unpronounceable names as well. So when Ollie graduated from the university and was hired to teach in Boston, where there were no crops, no one was surprised. Mothers, seeing him walk through the town with his almost proprietorial air of self-assurance, regretted that he would probably never become their son-in-law. When young women saw Ollie on the street, they would study his face openly for a moment and then calmly look away, as if they had just glanced at their own reflection in a store window.

Ollie expected that "the East" would be like Ohio, but busier, and with a tangible and monument-filled sense of history. During his first few weeks there he travelled alone on a bus as far south as Washington and wrote home detailed letters about the smell of blooming gingkos and the grandeur of the Capitol. He spent a day in Salem and mailed his older brothers post cards with the glossy black outline of a witch and a cat sailing through the sky on a broom. He sent his mother a pebbled glass jar of cranberry jelly that he bought on the Maine coast, knowing that she would never open the jar because the label showed a romantic

lighthouse with a yellow beam shining out from under its cupola. And in Cambridge he found a calf-bound volume of selections from Longfellow and bought it for his father, a kind man who loved to quote New England poets and who had a local reputation as a man of learning.

When classes started, it seemed that all the other professors and the students could do was gather in tight little clumps and argue. They were not friendly, and he had to resist an impulse to call some of his better-dressed students "sir." Invited once to sit at a table in the faculty lounge where the conversation rang with foreign names - Chamberlain, Franco, Trotsky, Kerensky - he felt as though he were listening to another language. They knew, or seemed to know, all of the world's secrets; it was what his mother would have called "The gossip of the wealthy." At a faculty reception for new students, Ollie was confronted by a young man who demanded to know his "qualifications" after revealing that his own schooling had begun in Boston, moved with his father's diplomatic appointment to Geneva and then been transferred to a Berlin gymnasium. To make matters worse, the student had even studied morphology in Germany with Weber, whom Ollie had always assumed to be an American. Invited to talk by the student's expectant silence, Ollie heard himself say that he was born and bred in Ohio, but had "travelled much in Concord." The student looked at him blankly as if he had spoken in tongues and Ollie began to feel more and more like an imposter.

The first day that the students boycotted classes, and he heard their angry voices outside the window, Ollie had a moment of corrosive panic in which he imagined that they were demonstrating against him. Now, turning away from the casement windows, he faced the lecture outline he had chalked on the blackboard three days before. It was a biology lecture. He had been hired as an entomologist but was assigned to teach only freshman biology and hygiene classes. A new wave of cheers carried through the window. It's none of their business what the world does, he thought again.

On his way out of the building Ollie stood and listened beside the frosted glass doors of two other large lecture rooms to satisfy himself that they, too, were empty. He left through the back door of the science building and walked in its shadow across the trampled lawn toward the safer and gloomier shadows of the administration building. He glanced nervously back once to reassure himself that the students, in the white sunlight beside the building, were not paying any attention to him. But as he was about to escape from their line of sight, he felt someone grab his elbow and his heart suddenly went heavy. He turned slowly, sternly, and slightly elevated the books he was carrying, hoping they would suggest he was on an important academic mission and didn't have time to argue politics with a student. Instead of an angry young face and a placard, he saw a grey suit which bunched across the shoulders of a very tall man who was stoop-shouldered and intense in a scholarly sort of way.

The man puffed slightly. His eyes were set so far apart that the wire-rimmed glasses he wore looked dangerously unstable balanced on the sharp bridge of his nose.

"Burgess," the man announced, extending his hand.

"I'm not ... whoever that is," Ollie said, trying to switch his books to the left side so he could at least shake the man's hand properly.

"I'm Burgess. Professor Burgess," he said. Ollie noticed that some of the students seemed to be hooting at him. Could it be this Burgess who was responsible for all the trouble?

"They don't like me because I told them they didn't know what in hell they were going on about," Burgess said, taking Ollie's hand and shaking it with such unfeigned gratitude that Ollie felt himself blushing. "I had to tell them that I had an appointment with you just to get away," Burgess said.

Burgess appeared in Ollie's letters home only as "a friend of mine": "I was telling a friend of mine who's from the East about the problems you have keeping the store's stock up, what with the bad rail service" or "I talked about future job prospects with a friend of mine who's been teaching for three years now." Sometimes, Burgess was presented in the plural: "I ate the cake with friends who said they don't make them like that around here." Sitting alone in the faculty lounge, grading papers or writing to his parents, Ollie would first sense Burgess' presence, then hear

it, then feel himself completely surrounded by the man when he brought his coffee cup over to take up a conversation with Ollie that he may have begun two weeks before. Burgess seemed to have read everything, remembered everything he'd ever heard or seen, and to have concocted from his knowledge more solutions than Ollie knew there were problems. When Ollie told Burgess about the problems his father was having keeping his hardware inventory up, Burgess drew up a plan for a buying co-op that would let retailers like Ollie's father consolidate their orders and distribute their own lines. Burgess even offered to speak to Ollie's father about it, an idea which sent a sharp surge of anxiety through Ollie's chest. Burgess seemed not to know that, as an outsider, his advice would not be welcome.

When Burgess first began to sit and talk with Ollie in the lounge, the other faculty members near them gave Ollie sympathetic looks when Burgess raised his voice, pounded on the table or banged the steel frames of his glasses annoyingly against his coffee cup. Yet, Ollie felt flattered that Burgess talked with him; his talk was certainly no worse than the others.

Ollie knew that they were annoyed with Burgess for more than his noise. Stipends and grants were drying up so fast that the administration began talking about cancelling courses and teaching contracts by the beginning of the second semester. It was well-known that Burgess had been hired with a generous understanding by the Department of History and

the Dean's Office that he would complete his thesis by the time the university's annual bulletin was published because it listed him as a Ph.D. But that year's listing as well as the next two were fraudulent because Burgess had never completed his thesis. How he had managed to hang on to his position, no one was sure, even though Ollie had heard a dozen times that Burgess' wealthy father had promised to add to the university's endowment. Ollie never asked Burgess about these things, matters of money and family position being the most private subjects he could imagine.

Because Ollie usually met Burgess at the university he was surprised to find a note stuffed into his mailbox asking him to come and visit Burgess in his room. He inhabited the loft of a gothic brownstone a few blocks from the campus, the kind of place where Ollie expected to look up and see stone gargoyles squatting on the eaves. Ollie paused at the open door of Burgess' room and saw his round back curving over a tiny writing table. The bed was almost hidden under scattered library books with cracked spines and yellowing pages of manuscript. Ollie knew that Burgess was still trying to complete his thesis, a study of Marxian models of Utopia, but every time he finished a draft, he would gut it in disgust and begin again. This, despite the fact that he had published whole chapters from each draft and left a complete selection of offprints on the coffee tables in the faculty lounge.

Ollie didn't know whether he should interrupt Burgess

or just wait for him to look up. He squatted to study the titles of a shoulder-high pillar of books balanced against the door jamb. At the bottom he could just read the title of Madame Blavatsky's Isis, and above that a book on Renaissance numerology, a Dashiell Hammet novel, a thick paperback called The Invention of the Astrolabe, and another dozen titles which he didn't want to read. As much as he respected Burgess, there was something not quite right, something almost promiscuous about all that knowledge. He tapped lightly on the door. When Burgess stood up, the room seemed to take on an entirely different shape under his height.

"The news," Burgess said, picking up a copy of Time and waving it. "The news." He let the magazine fall to the floor and stepped over it, kicking a thick book out of the way as he approached. "It's all going to fall apart," he said. "In another year, you and I'll be tin-soldiering against the Germans. The isolationists are just pissing into the wind."

When Burgess turned his back Ollie could see his bony shoulder blades poking out the thin cotton shirt like underdeveloped wings. Ollie nodded to Burgess' back. He wanted to believe that, however he appeared, Burgess was an example of what his father called "a reasonable man," a figure he would summon up to help win an argument or voice a complaint. "If I was to present this situation to a reasonable man," he would begin, borrowing authority from this myth of tolerance and judgement, "I can tell you just what he'd say." And of course, the reasonable man always agreed with Ollie's

father.

"By the way," Burgess said, shoving a pile of books off a chair so Ollie could sit down, "I got the sack today."

Ollie was never quite sure how it happened, the events piling themselves up faster than he could follow. His father caught influenza and died in the time it took to exchange two letters home. And when Ollie returned to Ohio for the funeral, he didn't feel as if he'd lost his own father, but as if he were at the funeral of a friend's father. His brothers reopened the hardware store the next day and placed a black wreath on the front door like the one at the entrance to their mother's house. But when Ollie went to the store to see if he could help, he felt his brothers eyeing him warily, as if they thought he might steal something. Already, it seemed, he had become an Easterner, a traitor. He drove back to the train station alone.

Ollie was relieved to return to Boston, but felt in himself a strange, arid grief as though he weren't really sure of what he'd lost. Then, Burgess began visiting his apartment, talking about war, and mentioning those foreign names which now sounded oddly familiar. Once, when he was being bitter about having lost his job, Burgess planted himself in front of Ollie's bookcase and, drawing his finger across the spines of the Weber, Berlese and Snodgrass entomology texts that Ollie loved, declared, "Listen. <u>You're</u> never going to write one of these."

It hurt. Even after Burgess apologized, Ollie was sure that he had meant what he said and that he was also right. It seemed to be a terrible injustice that he should have to compete in a world filled with people who, like the student at the reception, knew more of the world when they were children than Ollie ever would. He was beginning to hate the thought of ever having to return to Ohio again.

Shortly before the end of the second term, Ollie received another note from Burgess. He said he was going to spend his summer in Florida and wanted Ollie to join him because there was going to be a war that would change the whole world. Ollie delayed answering; it was as if he'd been invited to the moon. But then he received a letter from the Dean's Office informing him that his contract had been "non-renewed" for the following year and would he please return the instructor's copies of the books used in his hygiene classes to the head of the department. Burgess commiserated with him briefly and then brought over a large travel atlas.

Ollie first knew they were in Florida when the markers along the rail beds changed prefixes from GA to FLA. There had been no geographic signals like the old hills of Tennessee or the surprising, ochre earth of Georgia. It had been Burgess' pennypinching, romantic idea to ride in boxcars - one that they occasionally abandoned by stopping to use a town's public baths, changing into clean clothes, and purchasing a coach seat to the next city.

The further south they travelled the more the heat pressed in on them. Ollie would wake in the middle of the night when the train's clattering rhythm was broken as it slowed at level crossings, blink the sweat out of his eyes and look around at the other men sharing the boxcar with him. Burgess, using his jacket as a pillow, slept on his back, usually with his glasses perched awkwardly on his forehead, or half-fallen off and dangling from one ear. Staring at the other men, Ollie would wonder where he was. When he pushed himself up a little further on his elbows, a bead of sweat would escape from his hair and feel like it was scrambling down the side of his face. In the mornings Ollie would wake clammy with the morning chill but already sweating from the direct sun, and stare out the open door of the boxcar at the green flashing countryside before opening his pack to find something for breakfast. Sometimes, they would leave the train for an evening and Ollie, feeling lost in the entourage of students, failed businessmen and roustabouts headed for the circus at Sarasota, followed them to bars and roadhouses and watched Burgess spend his savings from three years of teaching to buy them food and drinks. And always after a long night, Burgess, glowing with the pleasure of the early morning heat, would pat his moneybelt and assure Ollie that he still had a few dollars left.

They drowsily watched the land become flatter and stared at the ragged patches of sunlight that leaked through the cover of longleaf and loblolly pines in central Florida

and glared harshly on the dark forest floor. Breaking from the edge of the forests they could see motels and campgrounds beside the highway. "Don't tell me this is hard times," Burgess would growl when he saw white-jacketed bands playing for tourists who danced in slow clumps on unshaded concrete pavilions.

From the railway's southern limit they took a bus to the Florida Keys, the terminus of the last small leap before it seemed they would fall off the edge of the world. These small, low islands had none of the darkness of the interior south and seemed to be a transplant from another part of the world, arid and lush, unfriendly but habitable. Despite their name, the Keys' openness to the sun and the sea denied the possibility that they were hiding anything.

Ollie, after speaking to the clerk at the Islamorada post office, found an empty, whitewashed concrete house where the supervisor of a crew laying track for the railroad had lived - until a hurricane had peeled the track from the roadbed and drowned half the crew. They set up temporary housekeeping in two front rooms after cleaning out the debris left by animals and hoboes and washing the floor with sea water and soap to discourage insects.

To Ollie's surprise, he had to show Burgess - who didn't even seem to know how to use a mop - how to do almost everything. When buttons popped off Burgess' shirts; when the sole of his shoe flapped from the leather upper like a ceremonially stretched lower lip, when he was hungry, Burgess

came to Ollie, revealing a helpless inability to get along with the things in his world. Ollie expanded their two usable rooms to four, cooked fish and turtle and purchased groceries in Islamorada, and kept the steel drum behind the house filled with fresh water. During the day, he might walk along the highway through Matacumbe Key to the Overseas highway and follow the road to Craig where he could buy Trunk turtle from the black men who tended the kraals. Sometimes, after buying dolphin or red snapper for supper he took the guts and heads outside and flung them into the air for the gulls, who anticipated meal time with such a racket that it made Burgess holler for peace. It was the first time Ollie had felt honestly useful since he left home. The ocean itself seemed to him like a vast and fertile field.

Burgess was in and out of the house without seeming to notice the time of day. He spent most nights in a tavern that received tax-free shipments of rum from Cuba. And when he bustled in in the morning Ollie would cook a piece of flounder and an egg for him while he took a seat at one of the mahogany packing crates that they used for table and chairs. While he waited for Ollie to serve breakfast, he repeated the stories that he had heard the night before, about the gold discovered in a goatskin bag on Grassy Key, about harems and prison colonies established and abandoned by pirates and about the children they had deserted who grew up speaking a language of their own invention. Ollie, no longer uncomfortable with his own ignorance, followed Burgess'

long stories and began to feel that he'd left the United States and his own time altogether.

Burgess stopped returning for breakfast and he finally disappeared entirely for three days. When Ollie woke up on the morning of the fourth day, he heard someone pacing, recognized the sound of the steps, and when they stopped, opened his eyes to see Burgess framed in the door of his room. His throat constricted at the sour smell that came into the room with Burgess.

"Bags of gold," Burgess said.

Ollie asked him what he was talking about and heard Burgess' sharp and impatient sigh.

"Bags of it. All around us."

Burgess slid down the door frame, one hand steadying his glasses as he heavily hit the floor.

Ollie lay his head back down on the bag of clothes he used as a pillow and wondered what to do. Burgess began to snore. Ollie got up and walked past him, unconsciously holding his breath. He poured some ground coffee into a pan of water, lit a fire beneath it with mangrove tinder and broke an egg into the water when it began to boil. He then drew a pail of water from the drum behind the house, brought it inside and set it down noisily beside Burgess.

"Time to wash," he yelled.

Burgess' snoring stopped instantly. He leaned over the pail and scooped up a handful of water which he carried to

his face and splashed on his glasses.

"I'll get coffee," Ollie said, half to himself. The odor of sweat and liquor seemed to cling to the inside of his nostrils. He hadn't known that Burgess could be so unreasonable.

Burgess moped by himself until lunch, when he appeared in the cooking room and, standing in front of a packing crate, began to talk.

"I think we should get a boat," he said.

"I hope you know how to run it," Ollie answered.

Burgess seemed caught off his guard and sat on the crate when Ollie handed him a cup of coffee. He had a habit of stopping his conversation as if he were inviting questions from students, but he always reacted impatiently when they came.

"You don't realize what a sinkhole of history this is," said Burgess. "This is no Ohio. Down there," he said, pointing in a vaguely southerly direction, "they speak with an English accent. Key West is covered with bones. Human bones. They stumble on artifacts down here."

Ollie, feeling that he'd been dared to ask another question, poured himself another cup of coffee and waited quietly for Burgess to begin speaking again.

The heat started to bother him. He woke one night after dreaming of the time his lip had been split open by a baseball and then sutured, without anaesthetic, by the school nurse.

She'd given him a large apple to hold and commanded, "Squeeze this!" when he began to squirm from the nauseating tickle of the gut being pulled through his lip. Staring out the window at the moon, Ollie remembered where he was and realized that the sensation on his lip wouldn't go away. He touched his mouth and felt something scramble across it and off the side of his face. Blowing air and spit wildly out of his mouth to get rid of the feeling, he began slapping the floor beside his bedroll in the hope of killing whatever it had been. On other clear nights when sleep eluded him he stared at the ceiling and saw the leisurely pace of large cockroaches which would occasionally fall with a sharp little tic as they hit the floor. Outside the door to his room he could see Burgess' shadow moving in the erratic light from a candle. Somewhere, Burgess was finding books and he sat up at nights reading. Every time Burgess flicked a page over or hummed with satisfaction as he closed the back cover, Ollie remembered his mother's own suspiciousness on those nights when he had sat up reading. Because she was in her nightgown, she would open the door to his bedroom only enough to peep through and tell him that if he was going to stay up that he might as well do something.

Ollie had other dreams. In one, he woke up, stretched out his hand and felt Burgess' back and his bare and hard shoulder blades. And he felt as well the weight of Burgess' legs lying on his and the itchy sweat between them. Then he would wake up for real, terrified, afraid even of opening his eyes. After a while he would fall asleep and have the

dream again and then have to force himself to stay awake until Burgess returned to the house and until he heard the reliable scrape of the match and saw the candle's yellow light and Burgess' deliberately moving shadow.

For the first time in his life, Ollie was bored. He thought of walking to see the turtles on Crawl Key, visiting the post office clerk in Islamorada, fishing, anything, and as soon as he had the thought it became dully uninteresting. He was always heavily sleepy. He picked up one of Burgess' books and found that simply moving his eyes along the page cost him so much effort that he couldn't make any sense of what he was reading. Memories of home seemed to reveal a life so provincial and boring that he thought he would die before going back there. And when Burgess sat down with one of his endless stories or lectures, Ollie became angry. The dry thrashing of palm fronds and the gulls' cries on a hot afternoon annoyed him so much that he wanted to cry in frustration. But even the need to cry was no sooner felt than the thought of actually doing it seemed pointless and boring.

Through his raw nerves and uncontrollable crankiness it seemed to Ollie that Burgess had begun acting differently. He bought the food, even if he didn't take the trouble to select fish at the docks, and he prepared the meals. He kept the water barrel full, as well as the jerry cans they carried the water in. He stayed in the house more and talked less and tried, it seemed, to keep his boxes of books out of sight. Ollie even sensed an apology in the way Burgess put down the enamelled

metal plates on their packing crate table. When, one morning, Ollie could not remember having had any dreams, he decided that Burgess was the best friend he had ever had.

Burgess borrowed some money from Ollie, rented a fishing boat out of Key West for the day, and coaxed Ollie into going on it with him. Burgess piloted the boat - a long punt with steering cables running from the wheel to an outboard motor - himself, sitting quite straight at the wheel while Ollie occupied a canvas-webbed deck chair that was bolted into position near the stern. Burgess told Ollie, as he had been told, how to throw out the oily bits of chum. They trolled the calm azure waters and caught pompano and dolphin and put them alive into a wet hold underneath the bow seat. Ollie saw the dorsal fin of a shark break the surface of the water and every time he scattered a handful of chum, the gulls and the sharks came within yards of each other at the surface of the water. Ashamed and thrilled at the thought, he waited for one of the careless birds to be grabbed by a shark. He could see no one else on the water; it was a rare and exciting day.

As they skimmed past the tangled mangrove roots guarding the shore of a large and watery-looking key, Burgess suddenly stood behind the wheel and the cables controlling the motor rattled in their pulleys. He nudged the boat's prow into the roots and signalled for Ollie to follow him. Together they climbed past the mangroves through an immense cloud of tiny, biting flies onto a dry plateau of rock and coral scraps. What had caught Burgess' eye was a wall of rough-cut limestone rocks

just inside a chokingly congested glade of orchids and Osceola's Bloom. Behind the rocks was what looked like a cooking tripod that, destroyed by rust, had half-collapsed into the marl.

"Musket barrels," Burgess pronounced. He picked up a crumbling red hunk of metal. "See how they've rusted together?"

Ollie, who had seen rusting farm machinery and tools all his life, told Burgess that it looked more like a tire iron than a musket barrel.

"And these rocks are part of a defense perimeter," Burgess said, ignoring Ollie's comment. "You don't find limestone like that in Florida. They must have quarried it in the Bahamas."

"To me, it looks too hard for limestone," Ollie said.

Burgess opened his mouth and then, as if he had forgotten what he wanted to say, stood there with it open. Then he reached under his pant leg and rubbed at his ankle. He brought his hand out, holding his thumb and index finger pinched tightly together. Ollie watched him lift his thumb minutely and then bear down with his fingernail until there was a tiny pop. "You can identify this one for me, professor," Burgess said, flipping the dead tick in Ollie's direction.

Ollie slowly stood and walked away. When he swatted at the cloud of flies circling his head, he smelled the fish on his hands. He wanted to be free of his own smell, of his filthy clothes and everything else that Burgess, it seemed, had made him do. At the edge of the water where thick mangrove

roots reached out from the shore like black arms, he was stopped by a waving, glinting spider's web stretched across a tall barrier of dry, cane-like stalks. The spider itself rested, or waited, in the centre of the web, its legs arranged in tight pairs on each quadrant of its body, a thorny, ruffled cover on its back that made it look like the head of a small mushroom. As Ollie stared at it, he thought, Argiopidea, orb weaver, and the memory of the spider's name so startled him that he began to laugh. He knew its name. He touched the web with his finger but the spider wouldn't move. He blew on it, but it remained fixed and defiant. Then he unbuttoned his fly and pissed on the web, first breaking away the delicate guy wires that held it to the cane stalks and then as the spider raced along the ground, chased it with his hot stream. He spun a circle around it, laughing at its panicked dodges as he turned around, still pissing, to face the ocean. There was a splash at the surface of the water fifty yards from shore.

The water shuddered as it sent out waves which broke on the shore at his feet. An explosion of bubbles frothed around a rising form and then calmed itself as the stern of a ship broke water. It shuddered out spurts of water through a thousand holes in its long galleon hull. Its stern lifted slowly above water and then the prow suddenly bobbed up so that the deck rested parallel to the surface of the water. White sand shone brightly along the keel. Ollie stared hard at it, afraid to blink for fear that it might disappear. The sun was directly behind the ship but he could still read the carved letters

SANT standing out from the prow.

He screamed for Burgess, who stumbled noisily through the brush and appeared brandishing one of the rusty iron rods. They stood and watched it together. Finally, Burgess turned to Ollie, clasped his shoulders and forced him into a furious, laughing jig. "El Dorado, El Dorado, El Dorado," he sang.

When they approached the SANT in their own tiny boat, it seemed too clean, too new to have been under water for any time at all. The ship's main deck was only a few yards above their own. The far side of the hull was gaping with holes. One bulkhead still bore traces of bright paint. At the stern they were level with the captain's cabin. There had once been a glass window across the stern and though there was no longer any glass in it, the dark frame was intact and layers of barnacles now traced its outline. Inside, the eyestalks of a dead lobster protruded inquiringly above a mound of seaweed. In the centre of the cabin a spiny sea urchin had secured itself to a black, round table with a sharp fin on its top like a sun dial. The small room had intaglio wainscotting, more traces of bright paint, and from the walls hung what appeared to be shackles and chains. Burgess tried to step into the cabin but the weight of his foot on the window frame crushed it and the entire sill tore off and splashed into the water. Ollie felt as though he were looking at a face that had had its features almost completely erased.

That night Burgess set up camp inside the small circle of limestone blocks. "It's gold of a sort," he said. "The two of

us, we'll set up a museum here. Did you ever think that it might be the SANTA MARIA? What a joke. Or how about a narrenschiff? How would it be if 400 years ago America was really settled by a boatload of German lunatics? Or 500 years? America discovered by a fools' boat!"

Ollie fell asleep to the sound of Burgess' voice. During the night he awoke from a dream in which his father had given him a .22 rifle. Surrounded by his family in the side yard, they urged him to fire. He lifted the barrel to the sky, pulled the trigger, drew the bolt back, pushed it forward and fired again until the chamber was empty. His family applauded each shot even though it was soundless and his father put his arm around Ollie's shoulder in proud congratulations. Awake, Ollie looked over at Burgess sleeping with his head on his jacket, his arms and legs cocked at unlikely angles and his glasses fallen completely away from his face. He looked like a crumpled scarecrow. It came to Ollie quite suddenly that he could return home any time he wanted and teach at the high school. He didn't know what had kept him away before. There wasn't going to be a war just because Burgess said so; life could go on as it always had.

Ollie's heart felt whole again. Before going back to sleep he looked at Burgess' sleeping form and said, "You know nothing." Then louder, "You don't know anything." And Burgess, without his glasses, lifted his head like a baby not yet sure of the strength of its own neck and smiled hopefully. And right then Ollie was as sure as he would ever be of anything that

going home was the most reasonable thing he could possibly do.

The Trespassers

On the bluffs that presided over the beach, pine trees grew at a crazy tilt away from the constant wind. At the foot of the bluffs, where they kept their arbor, the shore was still at a safe enough distance that the line between sea and land was lightly drawn. Further out, the bulbous cords of seaweed and dead fish suspended in a light oil slick were invisible. From high above, a helicopter pilot reporting conditions on the freeway, another 300 yards inland, would see the ocean, a littered shore line, a sparse plain of scrub pine advancing on the sides of the bluffs, a denser concentration of old pine, an amazing jumble of barbed wire which the highway department had rolled up and deserted after it cleared the land for road building, and then, a great highway, tangling and untangling itself across the distant landscape.

They were on a bluff covered with strawflowers, where she was collecting a fall bouquet for her children. He stooped to help her and she accepted his presence. It was not a public park, but neither of them thought they might be trespassing.

Later, when they made love, it was just another part of the quiet understanding that they seemed to have. They agreed to meet again before they learned each other's names.

They spent a free day nailing wooden slats, scavenged from snow fence near the highway, on to a short row of tilted scrub just beyond the shadow of the taller trees. It was clumsy work, but their arbor became a bare network of even squares that crawled up the side of the stunted trees. They coaxed the soil beneath it to life by hauling baskets of seaweed and dead fish from the beach, letting it rot into compost and then digging the resultant humus into the sand around the trees. They planted climbing succulents with waxy leaves, as thick and spongy as a puppy's ears. Early the next spring they were surprised to find a crowd of tiny spring beauties and even a few wake-robins growing in the arbor's light shade. They had no idea where the seeds might have blown in from.

They also had no idea who owned the land, if ever the question occurred to them at all. A mile down in either direction, concrete summer houses sprouted from rocky, prominent hills overlooking the ocean. There was seldom a gate or a fence on the leeward side of these small white palaces, so they got quite used to visiting them; breaking out a window after the owners had left and letting themselves in to take advantage of the fireplace or to steal canned goods. More determined thieves, seeing a broken window, would sometimes follow. These others occasionally stole all the furniture from the houses, and once, a baby grand piano. They wondered how the

thieves, so much more ambitious than themselves, were ever able to get the piano out of the house. There were no doors wide enough, the house having been built (or so it seemed) around the piano.

On the front door of one of the smaller houses that was hardly more than a cottage, there had been a sign:

> If you need the food go
> ahead and take it. The fur-
> niture my husband bought
> when we were first married
> so it is worth nothing.
> Thank you.

When they saw the sign, they felt bad about taking even the food. Later, they were certain that the woman who had written it would appreciate their not having disturbed her furniture.

Once after having been away for a week, they walked down the bluff toward their arbor and saw two teenagers making love in its shady side. They watched for a moment before turning away. "I hope the poor girl has a blanket," she told him. "All that sand." To her surprise, he didn't answer, and walked quickly back to the trail up the bluff.

But that was a rare incident and neither of them ever again mentioned it to the other.

Food People

One weekend evening after a reception, the Thompsons found themselves alone with Lorraine Bellefeuille and they discovered they had something in common. "You're food people too," Lorraine delightedly exclaimed.

Ray Thompson had never thought of himself as a food person, then decided that everyone who ate anything had to be a food person, and then admitted to the special cachet that Lorraine obviously meant her expression to have. Looking at it that way, he didn't know if he were a food person or not, though he wasn't naive enough to imagine that he wasn't several other kinds of person.

He loved antiques, an acquired taste. His and Mary's furniture, which they had bought third-hand what seemed a lifetime ago, was one of their claims to fame as a couple. In a decade it had crossed the line from junk to antiquity. And because other people had expressed so much envy of their furniture, he had come to love it himself. And by extension he had come to love antiques in general.

He played golf, poorly, while wearing a black pullover like Gary Player's, and dreamed about competing in the Bob Hope Classic at Long Beach. He was faithful to his wife. He had abandoned marijuana in 1965 because he didn't want to be thought of as that kind of person, but now knew many people who, when they could afford it, unaffectedly used cocaine. He was troubled by the future because of a secret fear that in his old age he would be poor and alone and abandoned in a government nursing home for year after lonely year. He often felt guilty because his parents had been (and were) more successful than he was.

In fact, Ray had come to accept that he would probably never have success or money. He was a painter (and felt no shame about entering the word painter on the line where the tax form asked for his profession) who had for years been exhibiting at the galleries which were never noticed in the papers and which usually folded when the landlord had a lien put on all the paintings for back rent. He had years ago gotten over the need to think of himself as an artist manqué, recognizing the bogus aura of romantic failure in that term, and now worked persistently, but without real hope. He taught part-time, which paid for his painting, and Mary uncomplainingly paid for everything else.

I'm that kind of person, he told himself.

"We do like Indian food, with all those spices," Mary told Lorraine Bellefeuille, catching him unprepared. She was a supply teacher, a brilliant manager of their money and a

steady friend. He was sure that she didn't think of herself as any particular kind of person at all.

"I don't care for the south, myself," Lorraine confided. "In fact, you won't catch me setting foot outside of Delhi."

During the next several suppers at Lorraine's, they faced Mexican moles, ground nut stew, lobster, Bombay Duck, whitefish, buffalo, white, brown, basmati and wild rice. They ate at a long, plain wooden table rescued from an abandoned rectory, from Bavarian china which Lorraine's mother had given her. They liked Lorraine's other friends, who all seemed to live in wealthy municipalities on those poor little sticks of streets that hang inconspicuously from wealthier avenues. Each of her friends spoke about attending parties and dinners at the homes of the great, the successful, or the popular, and they were all well-educated and travelled, yet none were over forty. It was as though they had all put on their backpacks when they were twenty to walk across the Indian subcontinent or vacation in Goa, and they had never quite managed to take their backpacks off. Ray noticed that many of them often looked just a few dollars short of poor, as if the flannel shirts which they wore would, in middle age, smell of poverty and failure, but his own fears prevented him from ever saying this to Mary.

Without exception, Lorraine's friends had projects and plans. There was a book on early television advertising, a new and unperformed choreography, a memoir, a basement photo

gallery, an unmarketed invention, cookbooks, and a story forever waiting unread on some editor's desk. As they sat around the dinner table they traded and bartered recipes - a Tagalog specialty of fish and bullo peppers going for someone's English grandmother's damson plum jam. And once a week they went to a restaurant, sweeping first through all the Mediterranean second-story walkups, then through Austria, the Caribbean, Costa del Sol, and then darting into the most economical places they could find on the edge of Alsace.

Ray and Mary were flattered by the company. It seemed that such a friendly, knowledgeable and talented group of people was bound to be discovered by someone and that they would all benefit from it.

Then one Saturday morning Ray sat down to coffee and, plowing through the morning paper, was surprised to read his own name. It was a review which he read all the way through before returning to the first few lines to make sure the name was his. "A lucid and insistent questioning of space," he read, and lost the ability to focus his eyes clearly. "Work which is light years past the need for the pictorial, even pulling the rug out from under photo-realism."

Thompson Sleepers Languish in Predictable Academia. That was the headline. He turned cautiously to the front page to check the date, the spelling of the newspaper's name, and the reporting of other events that he had heard on the radio news, convinced that it was a fake. He read the review again, sure that one of his students must have somehow placed it with the

paper, but instead recognized the name of a local critic who was syndicated nationally. "Ignore everything in the program and walk straight past all the derivative university-work until you are stopped by Thompson's weightless gouaches, undeservedly kept in a lightless corner. Here is work that is fully matured, open and full of humor. He deserves to be rescued from this place."

Ray lowered the newspaper to the kitchen table and then closed it before Mary could see the headline. He felt naked. He had not even attended the opening of the show that was being reviewed, having given the university gallery some nudes he liked, but had sketched and painted in his Life Studies class to make a point to his students. He knew that the department would hang his work where it would look buried, giving the full-time faculty and perhaps even a few graduate students the best lighting and the best locations. He had given them the work a month ago and forgotten about it, spending the evening of the show's opening at Lorraine's.

His first thought, his first hope, was that no one would bother to read the review, much less say anything about it. By the time breakfast was ready he had almost succeeded in forgetting about it himself and, because it was a cold winter morning, asked Mary to heat up a crumpet and cook some pea meal bacon after he had finished her generous omelette. Then at lunch she surprised him with an airy quiche. He had put the Reviews section of the newspaper into a bag with the rest of the week's papers and hoped that Mary wouldn't ask for it.

She was little interested in most things the newspaper had to say and studied only the Home and Family section.

In the afternoon, he received a call. Mary, forgetting that it was Saturday, leapt to the phone because she had just applied for a job proofreading magazine copy and was anxiously waiting for an answer. Ray heard her formal voice tense with an unasked question. "It's for you," she called to him, her palm discreetly cupping the receiver. "It's a man."

The caller was a gallery owner, a friend of the critic who had praised Ray's work. He said he had been to the university gallery in the morning and he agreed with the review and he wondered if Ray would be interested in having the show continue at his gallery (which Ray knew would never face a lien on its contents) and perhaps expand it to have some other pieces included as well. And would Ray have coffee with him on Monday so they could discuss it further?

The call finished, Ray placed the receiver back in its cradle and told Mary that it had been someone who was interested in exhibiting his work, but he didn't tell her the name of the gallery or its owner. Mary, who had no plans for any sort of book or show, was, all the same, used to hearing everyone else's stories of near-publication, stolen ideas, unsigned contracts, kill fees, narrowly missed academic appointments and publishers' failures. "He sounded polite," was all she could think of to say. "But he should have known better than to bother you on Saturday." By supper, Ray had begun to change

his mind about being noticed and retrieved the Reviews section of the newspaper from the bag beside the garbage can to show her what had been said about him. She kept on glancing up from the page to look at Ray as if she wanted to make sure that it really was him. The telephone rang a few more times with messages from people who had seen the review.

Before bed they took a shower together and made love. The telephone calls, the sparkling fall of water in the shower and Mary's approval gave a special quality to their lovemaking, and Ray felt as if he were experiencing some entirely new relation to the world.

They were late for the dinner party at a new friend of Lorraine's because their aged Valiant refused to start and they had to wait for the truck from the auto club. Ray had promised to warm the car up during the day but had been caught over another lunch with the gallery owner who, in view of the additional work Ray had given him, decided to instal the show in the larger of his two rooms. By the end of their coffee the man had called Ray a genius and offered to be his exclusive agent for sales. Ray had never considered that there might be more to what had been happening than just one big show he could invite all his friends to.

The flat they were searching for turned out to be above a Greek shoe repair store and they had to drive for fifteen minutes around long one-way streets before they found a parking

place. In the building's miniscule lobby, the intercom buttons above the mailboxes were all lifeless, their springs having broken or rusted away. The curved staircase had an old bit of elegance about it but the air in the stairwell held such a sharp reminder of cat that Ray felt uneasy about even touching the sticky handrail. The back wall at the top of each landing was finished in a pinkish tile. The cats, the tile, and the smell of shoe leather from the shop on the ground floor gave the building the aura of a public urinal and Ray was grateful when the door they knocked on was opened immediately and they were admitted to the company of their friends.

The party, if not the dinner, had already begun. They deposited the red wine they had brought with Lorraine, who introduced them to their hostess ("A real food person," she said), who had a portfolio of drawings languishing in the offices of a children's book publisher, and returned to the kitchen to continue grating parmesan by hand. Ray followed her there and watched with embarrassed pleasure while Mary, in this strange kitchen, poked in the refrigerator, lifted the lid from a pot and squatted to peer into the stained window in the door of the gas oven. Yet, their hostess seemed not to notice the inspection while she opened the bottles of wine and set them aside to breathe.

Ray, despite himself, felt that someone should have mentioned something about his review or his work. Surely they must all have seen it, or heard about it, and would be happy

for him. Instead, they were peering into jars and pans in the kitchen. If they hadn't heard anything, he considered, it might be bad taste for him to mention it himself. The day before, the gallery had taken out a three-column wide ad in the newspaper to announce their spring shows and his name was fitted comfortably between names of unquestionable quality and success. Even his colleagues at the university had wryly congratulated him. He decided that he would introduce the subject by inviting Lorraine to his vernissage.

"Peach chutney," Lorraine said, pausing in her grating while her bust, a moment out of synch, continued to quiver.

"And the strawberry cobbler. I can't tell you."

"Chokecherries."

"Use the Finnish cloudberries that come from Newfoundland."

"Ahhhh."

"It was just too much."

"But you have to come from one of those cultures that doesn't get all queasy at eating fish raw."

"A Scandinavian or a Jew or something."

"It was just so..."

"It was just too much. I can't even begin to tell you, there's just no word to talk about it."

Finding no way to enter the conversation, Ray fled the kitchen for the living room, where someone was complaining because Fortnum and Mason's had closed and that when they were staying in London, that exclusive food store was always

the first stop they made after visiting American Express. The more he listened to them, the more he felt bursting with wanting to say that someone had noticed him, that there was hope for them all.

"Did you see I got lucky in the papers last week?" he finally said to a man who wrote reviews for an advertising weekly. "Someone's finally picked up on some of my work."

"Your work," the reviewer said, and told Ray that he'd been sending tear sheets to the magazines and dailies for months and that they liked to keep him on a string without ever using him.

Supper was laid out along a narrow oak table with half a dozen card table chairs on one side and an equal number of chrome and vinyl kitchen chairs on the other. The table was an entire geography, beginning at one end with a crinkly stack of papadums and crossing a dozen serving bowls and plates to tortillas at the other. It was plain right away that their hostess knew every ethnic grocery in the city and that she had made a coup because her guests hesitated for a moment before sitting and stood back to point and discuss the table. She asked them to sit down and start eating, with undisguised satisfaction. "Gulabjaman and flan for dessert," she said, raising the flag over her victory.

Ray's plate seemed to fill itself up. There were so many serving dishes that he felt like he was on the receiving end of a bucket brigade. Mary sat diagonally down the long table from him and attacked something with a fork. She speared it,

clamped her teeth around the tines and dragged it out between them with a high-pitched, dental kind of sound that he could even hear above the noise of other people eating. And those who were not already eating were cutting up their food and pushing it around on their plates as though they were examining sheep's entrails for a sign.

When Ray looked at his own plate, he couldn't remember having taken any of the food on it. He put what looked like a thin piece of prosciutto into his mouth and bit down. It released a slightly bitter and dusty sensation which he detected on the edges of his tongue. He swallowed the piece without chewing it and it felt like dry leaves going down his throat.

The vegetables on his plate looked like bright little decorations that people without much taste or pretension could show off in their living room in lieu of one of those paintings of a wide-eyed street urchin and his equally wide-eyed cat. Ray knew he should have felt hungry but he felt instead as if all his guts had just disappeared. He could find no reason to eat.

When he felt Mary's, Lorraine's, and their hostess' eyes on him, he continued putting pieces of food that were small enough to swallow whole into his mouth. And whenever a plate of food was passed his way he touched the serving fork or spoon and sometimes faked taking another serving, then passed the plate on. By the time his own plate was empty, he felt neither hungry nor satisfied and only wanted to brush his teeth.

"It was almost perfect tonight, wasn't it," Mary said on the way home. She was very happy. She told him that she had learned how to grow her own bean sprouts and that they were full of vitamins.

The next day, Ray skipped breakfast, pleading that he had put on weight, and promised to eat a healthy lunch at the university. Mary told him that to lose weight he should eat the things that would switch his metabolism from a fat-producing to a fat-burning kind of chemistry and made a complex analogy with setting a furnace thermostat in a way that would conserve the most fuel. She had been hired for the copy proofing job and it was her first day. She sat at the kitchen table wearing a slip and trying to decide between two dresses, one of which had a seam that was threatening to part and the other, the hem cut high to conform with an earlier style, too short. Her stomach made a small round bulge in the shiny slip like a Chinese gong and there was a little dimple in the material over her navel. Ray nodded his head at her explanation of his body chemistry and, watching her, decided she was so lovely it was impossible to imagine her old.

Ray skipped lunch entirely, surprised at how much extra time it left him, and used the hour to stretch a large canvas over a frame. At supper, Mary was bleary with fatigue and when she put the food on the table, he took a little of everything and sat through most of the meal with his unused fork poised above his plate. "When you don't eat, your stomach shrinks and then it starts to digest itself and you get

ulcers," Mary warned. She had been surprised to find on her desk at work among the usual stories in women's and general interest magazines, a thick sheaf of manuscripts about people who included dogs, mild torture, warlike clothing made from rubber and leather, and fantastic machines in their sexual pleasures.

"The things people have an appetite for," she told him. Though she was tired, her eyes glowed with the pleasure of feeling successful and useful. She brought a shot glass full of a dozen clear and lozenge-shaped vitamin pills to the table and put it down in front of Ray. The pills themselves, their hard shells glistening, went down without any trouble and left only a slight aftertaste of gelatin.

The next day, Mary was up and out of the house before he woke up. He didn't even think of having breakfast or lunch. By the late afternoon he began to feel a little tired, but very light, and remembered how as a young boy he could jump from a bed or table and somehow savor the moment of free fall so well that he imagined he was flying. When Mary came home they made love. It seemed to Ray that she could sense how sharply, newly sweet it was for him because she drew away from him for just an instant and looked at him as if to reassure herself that he really was who he appeared to be. He refused to eat supper, telling her that he had a large lunch late in the afternoon. All the same she set a place at the table for him and he guiltily occupied his chair and watched her eat. When he showered that evening he could smell on his clothes

and from his skin something dark and oily and unhealthy as if all the poisons were leaving his body. And under the splashing water, all his thoughts had such pellucid clarity that it seemed he should be able to project them on the wall for everyone to see.

Days passed. Mary became frightened because he had stopped eating and she refused to believe his stories that he had been eating away from home. She took this as a sign that he was being unfaithful to her. Ray wanted to explain to her but somehow found himself unable to. How could he say that everything he saw had become so lucid and that he felt free of doubt? He had even stopped worrying about his own old age and spent only three or four dreamless hours in bed at night, rising before dawn to read or sit silently sketching at the kitchen table. His weakness seemed unimportant. Where once he had taken the stairs to his classroom studio because the elevator was so cranky and slow, now he became grateful for its gentle acceleration, imagining that he would get the bends if it rose any faster. In class, his explanations, his drawings, had never been clearer or sharper, though he spoke very slowly. His students even seemed to move around him with careful gravity as though they sensed his frailness. Yet, Ray felt strong and decisive. He could see in the bathroom mirror his skin drawing back around his bony eyesockets, and when he glanced at a student in class he could see them flinch from the force of his gaze.

Lorraine invited them for supper and Mary told him that

she refused to go alone. Though she still thought he was being unfaithful to her, she said nothing to him about it, as though mentioning her greatest fear would make it come true. And worse, she imagined him doing the things she had read about at work. "You don't look well," she said. "You've lost far too much weight on this diet. All those poisons are stored in your fat and if it's burned up too quickly you'll poison yourself. And your head's starting to look like a skull. And you should have a decent meal tonight because Lorraine's been shopping for it all week and all her meat's Kosher so it's almost as good as if it were grown organically."

She said this all in one breath and her voice sounded as if she would begin to cry if she spoke any slower. Ray felt sorry for her, ashamed that he hadn't been eating her suppers and ashamed that he hadn't been able to make love to her when she wanted him that evening. He still couldn't find the way to tell her how clear his thoughts were and how untroubled his mind.

"I don't think you love me any more," Mary told him as she drove them to Lorraine's. Ray felt too unsteady to drive on the snow and since the Valiant lacked power steering, had asked her. "I don't think you love me any more," Mary repeated, and the car, as if to emphasize the point, suddenly slid sideways off the shoulder and banged flat into an eight foot wall of snow with a soft crunch.

"Damn you!" Mary cried. "Damn you!" The motor had died

but when she tried it again, it caught. The old snow tires bit and they drove on in silence.

Lorraine's English sheep dog had whelped during supper when they were last at her house and now there were puppies under everyone's feet. Every once in a while someone stepped back on a puppy's paw and the dog burst out with a sad and astonished cry of pain. Lorraine picked up a hurt puppy and loudly consoled the dog by telling it that it was lucky it wasn't living in Hong Kong, or they might be eating it for supper tonight. It was an old joke, like the one about stray cats that wander too close to the kitchen doors of Chinese restaurants, but everbody laughed anyways.

Ray held a warm drink in his hand and stood apart from his friends on the pretext of playing with a puppy. Mary had demanded that he eat or that he make up an excuse and return home before the meal was served. He told himself that, for Mary, he might try some food so she wouldn't be humiliated. She had gone to the kitchen to stare at the Cuisinart, lift the lids from pots, and look as though she might open the oven door. When supper was called, Lorraine led everyone to her rectory table heavy with food and a stack of thick paper plates. Ray saw Mary come from the kitchen and he ostentatiously picked up a plate and, without noticing what he chose, piled food on it until it was dangerously full. When he blew Mary a kiss she returned a bleak smile that made him feel as if he had betrayed her in some new way. He could feel the warmth of the food through the paper plate on the palm of

his hand. The food itself looked runny and foreign; none of it had a recognizable shape. And despite the thickness of his plate he could feel dampness beginning to reach his palm.

Ray watched his friends crowding around the buffet for second helpings. "You're not eating," he heard Lorraine say and felt himself warm to the kindness in her voice. Had Mary been talking to her? He could see her studying his face and, dimly, Mary watching both of them from a corner of the room. It occured to him that Lorraine might be the best person possible to tell about how he felt.

"I haven't eaten for a while now," Ray said, suddenly anxious to confess. "I don't do that anymore."

He had said it so seriously that Lorraine looked away in nervous disbelief. She turned back to him with almost a grimace of fear. "You have to eat," she said. "I worked hard all day to make it good."

To make it good? When he had finally told her about the show he was having, Lorraine had acted like she didn't want to hear, as if anyone's real success frightened her. He thought that she looked utterly sad and utterly lonely and wanted to ask her why she didn't have any children, why she had never finished anything, whether she ever worried that when she died there would be nothing left of her having been on earth except the remains of what a hundred friends at a thousand parties had eaten. And they were all the same. Is that what food people were? he wondered. Those who life simply passed through?

He noticed that Lorraine's nervous smile had disappeared

and that her face wore a look of narrow-eyed distaste and alarm. When he looked past her he saw that everyone had stopped eating. There was not a sound in the room, not even the tinkling of cutlery. Had he spoken out loud or were his thoughts so clear and bright that everyone had understood them without his saying a word?

"I am a success at something," Lorraine hissed. She turned her back on him and walked away. When he saw her elbow crook defiantly as she raised a fork or a spoon from the plate to her mouth, he threw his loaded, sopping plate at her back as hard as he could.

At home, Mary brought him gilt-rimmed glasses of bright, plastic-surfaced vitamin pills three times a day. She helped him dress, steadied him on his way to the bathroom, made excuses for him at school and then used her new salary to pay for a replacement when it was clear that he would miss more than a few days of classes. When she told him that the gallery owner had phoned saying that he would have to delay Ray's show because he'd just acquired some new European works and that it was absolutely necessary they be displayed right away, Ray barely paid any attention. He touched the crown of his head and felt where a small furry patch of hair had fallen out.

"You have anorexia," Mary said, brandishing a book which matched kitchen remedies with afflications and reading him recipes which called for camphor, aqua vitae, sulfur and

arsenic. Once she served him his vitamins on the one unchipped Bavarian plate which her mother had willed her, silverware carefully folded in a linen napkin beside his plate. Then she brought over friends, who were overly gay and forgiving. Then she brought him home advice from a doctor that if he didn't start eating he could be committed and would be fed intravenously. She sat beside his bed and cried. She tried to make him recall the feast times of his youth, all the family holidays and all the happy gluttony. She tried guilt. Had she been a different kind of person, she would have tried infidelity. Ray walked quietly around the house in his bedroom slippers, making short trips to the sink, the bathroom, the book case.

One day she brought him a dish bristling with the tiny green bean sprouts that she had learned to grow. "I grew these," she said, "and I think that you should eat them. I demand that you eat them."

Ray looked dully at the dish of greens.

"If you still love me, you will eat these," she said.

Ray raised himself on his elbows. "Show them off to your friends," he said.

Mary had always been a little clumsy and when she struck him, her fist was only half-closed, as if she had wanted to push him away and punch him at the same time. His eyes snapped open in surprise. Mary was transformed with horror when she saw the cut she had made across the bridge of his nose and down his cheek and she rushed to the bathroom for a cloth to wipe away

the drops of blood that had started to run down his face. When she returned, Ray was touching his face gingerly with the tips of his fingers and when he saw the blood on his hand, he touched it to his lips and tasted it.

A month before Ray gave up eating, his Life Studies class inherited a model because she had a contract for the year and no one else wanted to use her. She was herself a kind of leftover. She was the skinniest woman he had ever seen and he described her to Mary as one of those squatting Bangladesh scarecrows who are all knees and elbows. During one year, the model had told him, she lost four hundred pounds and her heart stopped beating three times from the strain. He didn't know if she had been jolly as a fat woman, but skinny she had a deflated kind of sadness about her. It was as if she had lost three complete women with her four hundred pounds, and her pouchy, flaccid skin was lonely for them. Thinking of the way Mary's flesh just coddled her bones, he knew that she didn't have anything extra to lose. But with the fat woman, what he saw and drew so well was the incredible transubstantiation of flesh into air, and imagined a sisterly trio escaping in unhindered flight.

Wintering Over

I used to love the city, the cold. We had just moved from a climate which spends half its year in June and the other in October and that winter I would ride a bus out of our flat-roofed suburb of duplexes, up the hill to the city. There it was so cold that it seemed that if anything stopped moving it would die. Achingly lovely young women wore clothes so useless against the cold that I sometimes could see delicate little stars of frost beginning to form under the skin of their bare cheeks. Buses steamed and lumbered through the slush like great, howdah-carrying elephants. People wrapped up in the swirl of their own coats and dresses were blown from the door of the métro station into a wild and snowy fog, all of them driven by the imperative to keep moving or freeze. They relaxed only on the buses home, where they travelled blind, the combined breaths of all the riders coating the windows with luminous frost, their bodies intimately and neutrally crowded together in the animal stink of wet fur coats. And there in our first flat I drew a chair beside the gas wall

heater to study, knowing that even if the giant hydro cables from James Bay were to crack and fall in an explosion of sparks that I would still be warm.

That's why it galls me that I should be standing here watching my own breath condense on the telephone receiver, apologizing into the phone like some meek Bob Cratchit while the secretary on the other end complains about having to cross the street to post notice that my morning course is cancelled. Then, out of pure meanness, she reminds me that I'll have to make the class up or have my pay docked, unsympathetic to my dual excuse that my house has frozen and that I have a doctor's appointment. She makes me feel that I've put the whole university's reputation on the line.

The call finished, I help my wife start moving the house plants into a shallow tub of water in front of the open door of the gas stove in the kitchen. Just as we must every time the furnace breaks down and the precious heat we've trapped inside begins to leak out.

God! The only way to enjoy Montreal in the winter is to be one of those happy people who live in a thick-walled postwar apartment building (The new high-rises, as we read every January, are always blowing underground cables, leaving their all-electric tenants to freeze in the dark without even a gas oven to keep them warm. All their plants dead. The milk in their defunct fridges frozen solid and splitting the sides of its cardboard carton.) where everything always

works and you never have to call a plumber, argue with a landlady about replacing a hot water heater, shovel the driveway in the morning and then have a vindictive snow removal crew come along, first with the insolent little tractors that run you off the sidewalk, then with a behemoth snow plow that banks a ton of snow along its angled blade and dumps the whole mess in front of your driveway when you're about to pull out. And without the salt truck that pulls up beside you at a light and leaves his whirring salt distributor on so that you hear the little pellets hitting the side door, cracking the paint's skin and depositing the seeds of rust that will bloom into a bumpy red blemish in the spring.

For us, there is as well the landlady who lives in Pittsburgh but somehow keeps her official residence here so that every spring when she thinks she's going to die she can come back for a free month of socialized medical care. If only she looked after the house as well. Instead, she has let her son connect the fuel oil tank to the house with tenuously thin, three-sixteenths inch copper line - the supplier of that winter infusion that keeps all our houses alive. When it becomes very cold outside, two things happen. First, at the valve between the oil tank and the feed line, condensation that has settled in the bottom of the tank freezes in the nipple and squeezes off the passage. Then the oil does not gush from the line as it should, it barely leaks through. I can tell when this is happening. The

pump on the furnace motor starts to groan as though it had just sucked in a cup of ground glass. It is subtle at first, but I wake to the sound more surely than I would to the smell of smoke. Shortly, the slow grinding turns into a pained animal cry and then everything abruptly stops, retreating into guilty silence.

The next humiliation of this day comes when I must phone the oil company, which only unhappily renewed our contract this year and where, when the receptionist hears my crisp demand for Service, I am put through without the usual questions about whether or not I have checked my fuel level or tried pushing the reset button on the fan motor.

"Ben quoi?" the voice in Service impatiently answers, as though he knew it was me calling. I try to pretend ignorance every time one of their men comes out and reaches nonchalantly through the service hole in the oil tank shed and then disgustedly draws his hand back out, rubbing the tips of his fingers. He always tells me that the line is frozen and that that's what is going to happen with a three-sixteenths inch line and that at the end of the year, if I don't do something about it, the company will see all the service calls beside my name on the computer printout and cancel my contract. And worse, he implies, will blacklist me - as though all the oil companies share a list of deadbeats and service headaches. It's a threat almost as great as if he were to tell me that every hospital emergency room in the city were going to blacklist me.

"So you're frozen, eh?" the man in the service department mumbles while I can hear him flipping through the pages on a metal clipboard. The computer printout must be a lie. It is the end of February and almost time to begin a spring countdown that will allow all these troubles to slide by for another year. If you get it running just this once, I want to promise him, I swear that it will never happen again. But I know that with the record there in front of him he would believe my lie even less than I would.

"Sir, you should bring that tank inside. You've already got a free service call this year and unless you want to switch to our full service contract, there isn't much we can do for you."

I know about the full service contract but it's more than I can afford. And like last year I know that having one of their men drive out at double-time rates will cost almost fifty dollars an hour, plus travelling time. When they came to inspect the whole system before insuring it I told them that the house belonged to me and I'd move the tank in as soon as I could. We may lose on you, the salesman said, handing me my copy of the contract.

"... or instal a five-sixteenths inch fuel line," I hear the man in Service saying.

I ask him if there's anything else I can do. I should have had my wife make this call. When I'm legitimately desperate I sound like I'm lying. The telephone connection goes silent for a moment.

"I can send a man out there," he slowly says. "It don't affect your service contract at all."

When I ask how much, he booms out laughter and quotes a price only about one third of the normal charge. "Cash. No receipt. No record. Do you understand that? And he gets there when he gets there."

God, I want to kiss his hand. I can lie and he can run a black market plumbing and heating service.

"Be there," is his final command before he cuts me off. The floor is so cold that my feet feel like bricks.

Afternoon class over (I was unprepared and tried to fill time by telling them about my morning but they don't budget compassion for others who have to deal with the winter. After all, they made it in and were ready to receive their money's worth.), I walk a few blustery blocks over to the infirmary for my doctor's appointment. I began going there for checkups as a student and after, when I started teaching a few classes, saw no reason to change. But when I enter the waiting room, the receptionist ignores two Chinese students who got there a moment before I did to ask if she can help me. She probably thinks I am a doctor or a medical supplies salesman, or perhaps just lost. When I hand her my Medicare card, the Chinese students glare, imagining that my race, and not my age, gave me priority.

I had gone for ten years when I was younger without visiting a doctor, but lately had begun to enjoy a yearly

visit that lets me thumb my nose at the possibility of being ill, as if the visit itself warded off sickness. And the doctor, whose daughter is a student in the same department where I teach, likes to ask me questions about the best courses for her to take while he gives the examination.

But when I am called, I enter a room with a different doctor seated behind the desk. He is younger than I am and has a narrow crescent of acne down each cheek. He indicates a chair without looking up from my file.

"You're a real regular," he finally says, glancing up and smiling. "You should be part of my private practice."

With this new man, because of the surprise, the examination is embarrassing. And at the same time, I distrust the results, my health depending on the doctor I had before, even though this new one makes approving sounds at my blood pressure, throat, chest and back, my limbs, eyes and teeth.

When he asks me to get dressed, he leaves the room. I quickly pull on my clothes and start through the door toward the waiting room, but I hear his voice sharply calling me back.

"I spoke to you in the examination room when your back was turned and I don't think you heard me," he says pleasantly. He takes me into another room, rings a tuning fork above my head, inspects my ears for wax plugs and holds his softly ticking wrist watch beside my left ear, then beside my right. Still witholding judgement, he turns me over to a nurse who has me sit in a thickly padded chamber and instructs me to

push a button when I heard thready little tones come over a tight fitting pair of headphones.

I do this, thinking of my wife at home, wondering if she'll have any problems when the man comes to thaw out the fuel line.

"I'll give you a referral to a specialist," the doctor says, adding his own script to the bottom of the page in my file. "I wouldn't worry about it, but you've got some sen-sori-neural loss. Your ears are middle-aged."

I hear him perfectly well, as well as I heard last year. If there's anything wrong with my hearing, the fault is his. He makes it sound as if I purchased my ears from a dealer who cheated on me.

"It might have been a cochlear infection. It can happen any time. If you had it at the same time as a cold, you wouldn't even have noticed it. Or a very loud sound might have done it. Do you work with loud noise? The specialist can tell you if this thing is progressive."

Progressive? The receptionist, speaking loudly, phones a specialist to make an appointment for me but the young ears in the waiting room seem to take no notice. I want them to look at me and show sympathy that someone my age should be concerned about hearing. But they don't bother to look up from their magazines or their discussions and the receptionist hands me the referral slip as casually and dismissively as if she had just collected my ticket at a movie theatre and returned the stub.

Outside, the cold makes me gasp involuntarily as I can feel the muscles in my throat contracting and for a minute I am dizzy from lack of breath. My getting home seems to be particularly urgent as I pick my way down the hill to the métro station. What if my wife let the oven overheat and it exploded? What if the repairman came and, finding her alone ... I won't let myself think like this.

The five o'clock crowd in the métro squeezes into the cars like Japanese commuters and the people backed into the corners struggle desperately to push their way off the cars when we reach their stop. Fifteen minutes after boarding the train, I leave the station near my house. It is already dark outside. I see a light on in the kitchen window; there is no repair truck parked in front of my house.

I want to tell my wife about my hearing, but with the houseplants gathered around her in front of the stove as though she were teaching them to bake a cake, she doesn't look like she'd be interested right now. Instead, she tells me that the water in the toilet bowl has a thin skin of ice over it and she's afraid that the porcelain tank is going to crack unless I drain the water out.

It is ridiculous to think that we have had to wait all day for a repairman, but I can't call the oil company back because I don't know who I spoke to last time, and can hardly ask for the man who manages their black market repairs. Instead, I fill a three gallon galvanized pail with hot water, carry it out to the tarpaper shed which houses the oil tank,

pry open the little door at the bottom of the shed and carefully pour hot water on the valve. The name of the pail's manufacturer, pressed into its bottom, is preserved in perfect intaglio on the ice where I put it down. As if it had been blown out, steam pours from the hole and hits my face. The garage sits dark and silent beside me and its looming shape makes me feel nervous. I carry a few more buckets out and when I am done, reach blind into the low dark hole with my bare hand to feel the warm valve and convince myself that it must be thawed, that I've made the repair myself. But I can't quite get my hand past the coil of tubing to the valve, and suddenly there is an answering touch as something lightly brushes the top of my cracked and bleeding knuckles. I can't put my hand back in there.

Inside the house, I turn the thermostat up and hit the dirty red reset button at the motor and hope to be rewarded with the greasy smell of unburned oil that's collected in the combustion chamber and which the furnace cannot burn off fast enough. The flame catches easily, hopefully, and then the motor begins its horrible glassy groaning and as it shuts off, I see the top of the reset button jiggle as though it had been pressed from inside. Nothing but to wait.

When I go upstairs I realize suddenly how good my wife looks in her chair by the stove, where she is supervising the heating of a store-bought <u>tourtière</u>. Her skin is taut from both the room's cold and the stove's heat and her cheeks glow with healthy color. This is our first house, possibly

the place where our hopes stop, but for the moment she seems happy that she's managing to carry on despite all these troubles. When she hears someone in the driveway, and I don't, I decide not to tell her what the new doctor claims about my ears.

In the driveway there is a plain van parked with its blunt hood nosing into the street and its rear doors open wide. I turn the living room light off and see a man with bushy hair and a beard, illuminated by a street lamp, hauling a propane tank half his own size from the dark interior of the van. I try to read his license plate (evidence if I need it) but without leaving the house with a flashlight and brushing the snow from it, I can't make out the number. The man, now from the side window, walks the propane tank up the driveway as though he knew the house intimately. (Then I remember that the delivery receipt handed me by the oil company truck driver always has <u>À côté du garage</u> written somewhere on it.) Through a rear window, I can see the man hunched over the snow-buried path that the oil line follows between the tank and the house. A red glow from the torch appears under his squatting haunches and becomes a watery pastel as the light halos his head and shoulders. He works without moving his body except to sweep the oil line with the broad red flame from his torch. Then the flame shrinks and he drops the torch in the snow and walks through the back yard (more intimacy!) to my side door. Both my wife and I jump at the sound of his knock.

His bush of hair turns out to be an oil-darkened parka but his beard is real enough and even though the house is freezing inside, his beard is still dripping moisture from the heat of the torch. He asks if I will turn the heat up to 85 degrees and take him to the furnace. His English is at that rudimentary stage which makes both speaker and listener feel backwards and he ends each of his sentences with la, pronouncing the word so that it almost sounds as if he is saying "low."

I turn the heat up at the thermostat and he follows me to the basement, where he opens the furnace fuse box, slams it shut, slides the cover from a grey metal box attached to a galvanized duct that seems to pierce the combustion chamber itself, and heavily pushes the flat red reset button.

The furnace makes a sound like a very heavy animal beginning to move after a long hibernation. Two ejaculatory bursts of flame shine out the inspection window and briefly turn the repairman's face red as he peers inside. The flame catches and the furnace shakes the walls with its roar. A warm, greasy smell fills the air.

"Ca marche, la," he announces.

We stand at opposite ends of the laundry room, which is also the furnace room, a basket of dirty clothes between us. I feel at ease with working men and their own mysteries - partly because they all seem eager to show off what they're doing and to teach you what they can, undiscovered stars

all - and offer him a cup of tea, which he accepts with the surprised pleasure that they always do. When I bring the cup downstairs for him he is once again squatting in front of the pyrite inspection window. Seeing me, he stands up and announces that I should switch to stove oil for the coldest months of winter (which I've done in the past but it still doesn't prevent the accumulated condensation from freezing the valve) and that I should pour in a couple of gallons of alcool to absorb the moisture in the line (something new). Then he tells me that he's been working for fifteen hours straight and grins wearily through his glistening wet beard.

"I don't mind in the winter," he says. "We are living our lives very easily, la. In the north, the, uh, trappeurs, la, they are living much colder than us."

He describes how he and his brother and their wives camped in a snowy Laurentian pass for two weeks and drove back home with the car windows cranked all the way down because they were so used to the cold. He says they could feel the heat from the city when they were still twenty-five miles away. He slurps his dark, unsweetened tea, sounding like he's straining it through his front teeth. My wife has given us china cups and I can see the oil stains his fingers are leaving on the handle. We both seem to have already run out of things to say to each other.

But he has only been planning the sentences before speaking them. "Since ten millions of years," he says, "everything that was living on the earth is dead. It goes under the

ground and ..." The word completely escapes him. "It turns into the oil, la." Then he taps my scrawny copper feed line. "We are burning everything that was alive. In ten million years the people alive now are going to heat up some guy's house, la," he says, opening his mouth wide and laughing.

The sound of the furnace resonates dimly through our house and we can still see our breath, hesitant little puffs, if we wander too far from the warm kitchen. We are both exhausted. When I paid the repairman and saw him to the door, I felt something new in the outside air, perhaps a wearing down of the season. Back in the kitchen I found my wife nodding asleep, the high color of her cheeks gone. Awake now, she sniffs at the oily air and I wonder about opening the window to let it clear out. Instead, I take my wife in my arms and let her fall back to sleep while the furnace motor, humming below us, sounds the relentless countdown to spring.